

Alien Voices under the Bean Arbor: how an Eighteenth-Century French Jesuit translated the *Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閒話 as the “Dialogue of a Modern Atheist Chinese Philosopher”¹

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Abstract

This article examines an eighteenth-century French Jesuit's translation of the final chapter of the early Qing collection of vernacular stories *Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閒話 [Idle Talks under the Bean Arbor], which became a “philosophical dialogue” of a “modern Atheist Chinese philosopher”. I trace the astonishing trajectory of this text from China in the aftermath of the Ming-Qing transition to Enlightenment Europe by analyzing the layers of meaning superposed upon it by a succession of agencies: the original author Aina Jushi 艾衲居士, an anonymous Jiangnan literatus who philosophized on the fall of the Ming dynasty; Father François-Xavier Dentrecolles, the Jesuit missionary who translated the text with extensive commentaries of his own to make a case against atheism; the Parisian editor Jean-Baptiste Du Halde who published the translation in 1735 in the *Description de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie*

¹ During its very long gestation, this article has benefited from the help of many scholars who read its successive versions, offered comments, and drew my attention to relevant documents and scholarship I was unaware of. They include (in alphabetic order): Roland Altenburger, Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, Chan Hing-Ho, Sally Church, Catherine Jami, Isabelle Landry-Deron, Michael Langford, Rainier Lanselle, Geoffrey Lloyd, Jacques Revel, Antonella Romano, Nicolas Standaert, Alexander Statman. I also thank the editors of *T'oung-Pao* and the reviewers for their insights. Different parts and stages of this article have been presented at several conferences and seminars, in particular the European Association of Chinese Studies (EACS) Conference in 2014 (Coimbra, Portugal), where it was shortlisted for the Young Scholar Award, and the Fifth International Conference “Portugal and East Asia: History of Mathematical Sciences” (2015, Hsin Chu, Taiwan). Organizers of these conferences must also be thanked for their invitation and travel grants they provided. I have considered elements of this case in two publications in French: “Un dialogue de sourds entre deux systèmes du monde: la cosmogonie d'un romancier chinois du XVII^e siècle traduite par un missionnaire jésuite français”, in Patrice Bret and Jean-Luc Chappey (ed.), *Pratiques et enjeux scientifiques, intellectuels et politiques de la traduction (vers 1660-vers 1840)* (forthcoming in 2017 on www.perspectivia.net); *Traduire la Chine au XVIII^e siècle: les jésuites traducteurs de textes chinois et la reconfiguration des connaissances européennes sur la Chine (1685- ca. 1740)* (Paris, Éditions Honoré Champion, 2017), Chapter 3. This article summarizes points I made elsewhere in French, while developing new arguments based on new materials and new readings.

chinoise, a landmark of Jesuit sinology with considerable influence in Europe; the engravers in Paris and the Hague who remolded its cosmological diagrams to conform to their own scientific and aesthetic standards; and finally the English re-translators of the *Description*, and a freethinking French reader, the Marquis d'Argens, who used "Chinese philosophy" as a weapon against the Jesuits and the Catholic Church. As a conclusion, I discuss the gains and losses of the *Doupeng xianhua* during this complex journey and the new light brought by this French translation on its circulation in Qing China. I shall also discuss the challenge this atypical case poses to received narratives of the Sino-Western cultural exchange through the Jesuit mission.

Keywords: *Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閒話, *Description de l'Empire de la Chine*, Jesuits in China, translation, Chinese philosophy in Enlightenment Europe

1. Introduction

In recent year, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jesuits' use of Chinese sources in their writings on China has attracted increasing scholarly attention. While these writings, an essential contribution to European knowledge about China, have long been studied as outsiders' "reports", "ethnohistories" and "travelogues",² it is their translation and negotiation between different traditions that is undergoing ever closer scrutiny. Well-known aspects of the Jesuit literature on "Confucianism" and China's ancient history have been re-examined in light of their complex selection of Chinese texts.³ One influential landmark of eighteenth century European sinology, the *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise* (Paris, 1735) edited by J.-B. Du Halde

² Donald Lach and Edwin Van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, Book Four, Volume III, *East Asia* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1565.

³ In particular Thierry Meynard, *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus (1687): The First Translation of the Confucian Classics* (Rome, Institutum historicum Societatis Iesu, 2011); id., *The Jesuit Reading of Confucius: The First Complete Translation of the Lunyu (1687) Published in the West* (Leiden, Brill, 2015); Nicolas Standaert, *The Intercultural Weaving of Historical Texts: Chinese and European Stories about Emperor Ku and His Concubines* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

on the basis of manuscripts sent by his brethren in China, has attracted particular attention from this perspective. An encyclopedic work running over four volumes, or more than 3000 pages in-folio, its massive use of translations has first been highlighted by Isabelle Landry-Deron, who identified in her pioneer studies eighteen of these Chinese originals, including not only classical texts but a wide range of works by “modern” authors.⁴ Further identifications have been made since then.⁵ These and other findings are fundamentally renewing our understanding of the embeddedness of Jesuit sinology in book history and the history of knowledge in Ming-Qing China.

This article aims, on its own scale, to contribute to broader debates by examining an atypical translation in the *Description* that challenges many received narratives. The French translation appeared under the title of “*Dialogue, où un Philosophe Chinois modern nommé Tchin expose son sentiment sur l’origine & l’état du Monde [Dialogue, wherein Chin, a Modern Chinese Philosopher, declares his Opinion concerning the Origin and State of the World]*”.⁶ The translator was the China missionary François-Xavier Dentrecolles (1664-1741). It was part of a section in volume 3 of the *Description* devoted to the major schools of thought that the Jesuits then distinguished in China, namely the Buddhists (“*secte de Fo*”), the Taoists (“*secte des Tao Tseï*”), and the Confucians, the latter being further divided into Ancients and

⁴ Isabelle Landry-Deron, *La preuve par la Chine: la "Description" de J.-B. Du Halde, jésuite, 1735* (Paris, Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences sociales, 2002), 181-247.

⁵ Frédéric Obringer, "Le jésuite et le polygraphe de Yangzhou à la recherche de la longue vie" (*Carnet du Centre Chine*, 2012, <http://cecmc.hypotheses.org/6169>). my forthcoming book, *Traduire la Chine au XVIII^e siècle*.

⁶ *Description* (French) vol. III, 42-64; (English) vol. I, 665-678. The *Description* enjoyed two French editions during the eighteenth century: the 1735 Paris “*édition royale*”, and a “pirate” edition in 1736 (The Hague, Netherlands: H. Scheurleer), which circulated much more widely, and to which I will go back later. On the Hague edition, see Landry-Deron, *La preuve par la Chine*, 40-47. It also enjoyed two distinct English translations: an unsigned complete one in 1738 (*A Description of the Empire of China and Chinese-Tartary, together with the Kingdoms of Korea, and Tibet: containing the geography and history (natural as well as civil) of those countries*, 2 vols., London, T. Gardner in Bartholomew Close), and an incomplete one by R. Brookes, entitled *General History of China, Containing a Geographical, Historical Chronological Political and Physical Description of the Empire of China, Chinese-Tatary Corea and Thibet* (London, John Watts, 1741). Their differences can be summarized as follows: 1) The 1738 edition is complete, while the 1741 edition eliminated most footnotes, illustrations, and translations from Chinese. 2) The 1738 edition, while keeping all footnotes of the French original, also added more footnotes of its own. 3) The 1738 edition contains an unsigned “Translator’s Preface” and a “Dissertation concerning Mr. d’Anville’s General Map”, whereas the 1741 edition contains a completely different Preface by the translator Brookes. For the overlapping parts, the 1741 version can be regarded as a reproduction of the 1738 version albeit with occasional modifications. In this article, I quote the 1735 Paris edition for the French text, and the 1738 edition for the English translation. The English version is a quite literal rendition of the French..

Moderns (“*secte de quelques Lettrés de ce dernier temps*”).⁷ Du Halde presented this translation as an all-encompassing philosophical work, in which “*un de ces Philosophes [...] expose son système sur l’origine du Monde, sa Physique sur la nature des choses, son plan d’Astronomie, ses principes de Méchanique, son sentiment sur les ames, & ses règles de Morale* (one of these Philosophers reasoning while he explains his System concerning the Origin of the World, his Physics or Doctrine of the Nature of Things, his Plan of Astronomy, the Principles of his Mechanics, his Opinion concerning Souls, and his Rules of Morality).”

Yet – Du Halde continued – by reading this translation,

“On verra qu’il s’égare également, soit qu’il parle en physicien, soit qu’il moralise. On verra quel est orgueil & l’aveuglement de ces prétendus Sçavans, qui, dans l’arrangement des principes & des conclusions de leur système, s’accordent si peu avec eux-mêmes ; qui prouvent très-mal, ou ne prouvent point du tout ce qui a le plus besoin de preuves ; qui n’ont ni justesse, ni solidité dans les conclusions qu’ils tirent des principes qu’ils ont établis.[...]”⁸

This statement is in stark contradiction with the widespread image of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jesuit missionaries as willing cultural mediators between China and Europe, and their writing about China as primarily expressing respect and admiration. It also strikes one immediately as contradictory to our conventional understanding of translation. Why should a missionary toil to translate a Chinese philosopher, if he finds only “pride and blindness” in the latter’s work? For which aim did he seek to ridicule a Chinese work in front of a French audience? Or was this translation a smoke screen disguising some untold agenda?

⁷ *Description* (French) III, 31; (English) I, 665. The French word “*secte*” did not carry the negative meaning it has today, but only referred to a body of followers. See Nicolas Standaert, “The Jesuits did NOT manufacture ‘Confucianism’”, *East Asian Science* 16 (1999), 120-121.

⁸ *Description* (French) III, 41. The 1738 English translation goes: “We shall see that he is equally in the wrong, whether he speaks as a Natural or a Moral Philosopher: We shall see how great is the Pride and Blindness of these imaginary learned Men, who, in the Principles and Conclusions of their System, agree so little among themselves, who either prove not at all, or in a very bad manner, the Things which stand most in need of Proof; there being neither Justness nor Solidity in the Conclusions which they draw from the Principles they lay down.” *Description* (English) I, 665;

The Chinese original is identified by Du Halde as the work of “*un Philosophe Chinois moderne nommé Tchín* [A modern Philosopher named Chin]”,⁹ which, as Landry-Deron already pointed out, can correspond to more than one common Chinese family name (Chen, Cheng, Zhen or Zheng in *pinyin*).¹⁰ My initial attempt at systematic research in the corpus of Ming Neo-Confucians, such as the *Mingru xue'an* 明儒學案 [Case Studies of Ming Confucians¹¹], was to no avail. This perhaps is the reason why this text has hitherto barely been studied.¹² Yet Father Dentrecolles did leave a clue in the translation itself. We read on page 63 of the Paris edition, in the main text:

Voici ce que je pense, répondit le Philosophe; ce que dans le Ciel & sur la Terre, est le principe des Productions les plus admirables; cet Etre, ce *Ki* fortifie ceux qui sont foibles, & affoiblit ceux qui sont trop fort (a).¹³

And in footnote (a), a full-length phonetic transcription of the Chinese original text:

(a) Voici le Texte *Tien ti tsao hoa tchi ki pou tsou tché tsoú tchi yeoù tù tché sun tchi*.¹⁴

Combining the translation and the phonetic transcription, the original Chinese can be reconstructed as: *Tian di zao hua zhi qi bu zu zhe zhu zhi you yu zhe sun zhi* 天地造化之氣不足者助之有餘者損之. It then requires no more than an Internet search to find the original, already digitalized and available on many online reading sites, including the Gutenberg Project. It was in fact not a philosophical work by usual reckoning, but the final chapter of *Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閒話 [Idle talks under the

⁹ *Description* (French) III, 42, (English), I, 665.

¹⁰ Landry-Deron, *La preuve par la Chine*, 231.

¹¹ This is the translation by Chu Hung-Lam, “Confucian ‘Case-Learning’, the Genre of Xue’an Writing”, in C. Furth *et al*, *Thinking with Case*, (University of Hawai’i Press, 2007).

¹² Apart from Landry-Deron’s inventory of translations in the *Description*, Knud Lundbaek’s article on the transmission of Neo-Confucianism to the West is the only one, to my knowledge, that has taken note of this text. Knud Lundbaek, “Image du néo-confucianisme dans la littérature européenne du XVII^e à la XIX^e siècle”, in *Acte du III^e Colloque international de sinologie, Chantilly* (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1983), 143.

¹³ *Description* (French) III, 63; (English) I, 678: “My thoughts concerning this, replied the Philosopher, are these: That which both in Heaven and Earth is the Principle of the most wonderful Productions, this Being, this *Ki*, strengthens the Weak, and weakens those who are too strong.”

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

Bean Arbor], a collection of vernacular stories (*huaben* 話本)¹⁵!

This article is thus an attempt to account for this curious translation, which appears to have occurred not only between languages, from Chinese to French and other European languages, but also between usually segregated genres of literature and orders of knowledge. My analysis will follow the trajectory of the travelling text as it passes from one agent to another: first, I shall situate the original text and its originalities in the landscape of traditional Chinese vernacular stories of the early Qing era, briefly reviewing the extant scholarship and analyzing the author's agenda. Second, I shall turn to the work of the Jesuit translator and the way he dealt with the stylistic as well as philosophical subtleties of the Chinese original, before decrypting his agenda through his extensive use of footnotes. I shall then move to Europe to examine the editorial work: how Du Halde edited his confrere's manuscript, and how European engravers refashioned the diagrams of the Chinese original according to their own standards. I shall propose at the end some clues about the reception of this translation, before concluding on the broader significance of this case of cross-cultural transmission.

2. The original work and the author Aina Jushi

In the landscape of Ming-Qing vernacular stories, *Doupeng xianhua*, written

¹⁵ Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/25328/pg25328.html>.

I first published my preliminary findings in 2012, as a contribution to the research blog of Centre d'études sur la Chine moderne et contemporaine. (Huiyi Wu, "Nouvelle identification d'une traduction chinois-français (1735)", *Carnets du Centre Chine* (12 July 2012, URL <http://cecmc.hypotheses.org/7299>). Related discussions have been included in my doctoral dissertation (*Traduire la Chine au XVIII^e siècle : les jésuites traducteurs de livres chinois et la reconfiguration des connaissances européennes sur la Chine (1687- ca. 1740)*, Université Paris-Diderot/ Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane, September 2013, 169-227), in the summary of this dissertation (*Encyclo, Revue de l'École doctorale Économies, Espaces, Sociétés, Civilisations* (ED 382), 3 (2013), 199-200, URL http://ed382.ed.univ-paris-diderot.fr/IMG/pdf/encyclo_3_wu_huiyi.pdf), and in H. Wu, "Les traductions de F.-X. Dentrecolles, S.J. (1664-1741): localité et configuration des savoirs", in C. Jami (ed.), *Mobilités humaines, mobilité des savoirs et des pratiques*, special issue of *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 36 (2013), 65-66. It appears that Daniel M. Youd independently made the same identification, publishing his analysis in Chinese in December 2013. (Daniel M. Youd, "Jieyu xiaoshuo yu fei xiaoshuo zhijian: Ming Qing baihua xiaoshuo de quanqixing yiji xin faxian de qingchu huaben xiaoshuo waoqi de xiayi 介於小說與非小說之間: 明清白話小說的全球性以及新發現的清初話本小說早期的西譯 [Between Fiction and Non-Fiction: The Global Nature of Ming/Qing Xiaoshuo and a Newly Discovered Early Western Translation of a Qing Dynasty Short Story]", *Zhongzheng Hanxue yanjiu* 中正漢學研究, 33/2 (2013), 303-323.) This essay was brought to my attention only after I had finished the final draft of this present article. Therefore I have added some comments to the footnotes of this article to address points where we agree or disagree.

by a certain Aina Jushi 艾衲居士 [“Recluse in Artemisia Cassock”] of whom we know next to nothing, has long been regarded as a curiosity in its own right, particularly by Western specialists of Chinese literature. Several important studies, as well as complete translations in both English and French have been made.¹⁶ André Lévy found it a “curious work in many respects”;¹⁷ Patrick Hanan ended his *Chinese Vernacular Fictions* (1981) with a full chapter devoted to Aina, asserting, “this book marks a decisive break [...] with the basic model and fiction of vernacular fiction itself¹⁸”. Claire Lebeaupin characterized it as “extraordinary [*hors norms*]” in the foreword of her French translation,¹⁹ and most recently, Robert Hegel’s introduction to the complete English translation reiterated forcibly this assessment: “*Idle talk* is unique”.²⁰

Doupeng xianhua has been argued to be original in both form and content. The narrative unfolds in the quotidian settings of rural Jiangnan when villagers mounted an arbor with bamboo poles and sowed climbing beans around it. They soon grew used to regular gatherings under the bean arbor to drink tea and tell stories. The twelve chapters of the collection correspond to twelve sessions of storytelling, with the arbor as the sole space frame, and the life cycle of the beans from burgeoning to withering as the timeline. This narrative structure, strongly reminiscent of such

¹⁶ In chronological order: André Lévy, “Études sur Trois Recueils Anciens de Contes Chinois.” *T'oung Pao* 52 (1965): 97-148; Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1981); Claire Lebeaupin, *La leçon paradoxale du Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閒話, “Propos oisifs sous la tonnelle aux haricots”, *recueil de contes chinois en langue vulgaire (1660-1670)*, Mémoire de DEA, (Université Paris VII, 2005); Rainier Lanselle, “Doupeng xianhua 豆棚閒話 (Propos oiseux sous la tonnelle aux haricots)”, in Hing-ho Chan et al. (ed.) *Inventaire analytique et critique du conte chinois en langue vulgaire* (Paris, Collège de France, 2006), tome 5, 199-242; Roland Altenburger, “Idle Talks under the Bean Arbor: Aspects of Informal Non-Elite Storytelling in *Doupeng xianhua*”, unpublished paper (presented at the CHINOPERL Conference, Honolulu, 31 March 2011); Lindsey Waldrop, *Tension and Trauma in Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, PhD Diss., University of Oregon, 2016. For an overview of Chinese language scholarship, see Lanselle, 200-201.

The complete French translation: Claire Lebeaupin, *Propos oisifs sous la tonnelle aux haricots* (Paris, Gallimard, Collection “Connaissance de l’Orient”, 2010), and the English translation is Robert E. Hegel (ed.), *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor: A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection* (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 2017). I will overall follow this new English translation by Hegel et al., while indicating the occasional amendments I made in order to be more literal. The first chapter of the book has been translated into English earlier on, by Yenna Wu, “Jie Zhitui Traps His Jealous Wife in an Inferno”, with a translator’s introduction, *Renditions* 44 (1995), 17-32.

¹⁷ Lévy, “Études sur Trois Recueils Anciens de Contes Chinois”, 110.

¹⁸ Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 191.

¹⁹ Lebeaupin, *Propos oisifs*, 14.

²⁰ Hegel, *Idle talk*, xi.

Western and Middle Eastern classics as the *Canterbury Tales*, *Decameron* or *Thousand and One Nights*, is nowhere else to be found among traditional Chinese literature. André Lévy, first to refer to it as the “Chinese Dodecameron”, raised the question as to whether there was any influence of European literature that the Jesuits had been translating into Chinese since the late sixteenth century – hypothesis which Lévy himself rejected as unlikely, in favor of that of an independent creation by the Chinese author.²¹ Indeed, there is no evidence so far that the *Decameron* was ever known in China through the Jesuits.²² Moreover, such storytelling was common to the daily life in rural China: a perceptive author would not have needed to look far away to find inspiration.

Doupeng xianhua has also fascinated historians for its unusual “thematic contrariness”.²³ There was a formidable diversity of people and tongues under the bean arbor. The first eleven chapters put on stage no less than eight different narrators, older and younger, literate and illiterate, not to mention the men and women in the audience who contributed occasional witty remarks. They used both vernacular Mandarin and the Wu dialect. The stories told are variously situated in ancient history, in the contemporary world or in the legendary realm of immortals. Different storytellers also stood on very different sides of conventional moral values: some parodied well-known historical legends and the Confucian ideals they carry (Chapters 1, 2 and 7);²⁴ others offered rather conformist edification about good deeds rewarded and evil punished (Chapter 3, 4). One molded his story in the Buddhist worldview of reincarnation (Chapter 5) while another passionately accused the Buddhist clergy of gruesome crimes (Chapter 6). This dissenting polyphony makes it

²¹ Lévy, “Études sur Trois Recueils Anciens de Contes Chinois”, 131-136. Similar points have been made by Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 192-195; Lebeauin, *Propos oisifs*, 14; Hegel, *Idle talk*, xi.

²² On Jesuits’ translation of European literature, see Li Sher-shiueh 李爽學, *Zhong-guo wan Ming yu Ou Zhou wen xue : Ming mo Ye-su hui gu dian xing zheng dao gu shi kao quan* 中國晚明與歐洲文學：明末耶穌會古典型證道故事考詮 (Beijing Shi: San lian shu dian, 2010).

²³ Hegel, *Idle Talk*, xi.

²⁴ Yenna Wu’s translation “Jie Zhitui Traps His Jealous Wife In An Inferno” is one of these iconoclastic chapters.

impossible to take any single voice as representing the author's own view.²⁵ The new English translation, fittingly, employed ten different scholars to translate separate chapters.²⁶

Beneath the surface of “idle talk”, one can gradually perceive an unfolding historical dimension that situates the bean arbor in the late Ming world. Several major historical events are fleetingly but unambiguously named, including the posthumous trial of Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng 張居正 in 1583 (Chapter 4), the Revolt of the White Lotus Sect 白蓮教 in 1601 and an unspecified menace that lay beyond the northern border (Chapter 9). This historical dimension is fully brought out in Chapter 11, in which an elderly man takes the floor to edify the youngsters, recounting the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and the horrors of the war with the “marauding bandits” (*liukou* 流寇). The carefree youngsters, depicted as lacking all knowledge of the circumstances of the downfall of the Ming, set the scene if not the actual writing of the *Doupeng xianhua* to a date no earlier than the year 1660 or 1670.

The last chapter opens an additional cosmological dimension: this was the original text that the Jesuit translated as a “philosophical” dialogue. Entitled *Chen zhaizhang lun di tan tian* 陳齋長論地談天 [The professor Chen discourses on Heaven and Earth]²⁷, this chapter sees the arrival of a city-dweller to the village. This is a professor (*zhaizhang* 齋長) named Chen Gang 陳剛 and nicknamed Chen Wugui 陳無鬼, a man with a reputation as a learned dogmatic. Indeed, the name *Chen* has the meaning of “old”, “stale;” and *Gang* means “rigid”, “Unbending”.²⁸ At

²⁵ For a chapter-by-chapter summary, see Lévy, “Études sur Trois Recueils Anciens de Contes Chinois”, 112-127 and Lanselle, “*Doupeng xianhua*”. I also offer more extensive analysis of the first eleven chapters in Wu, *Traduire la Chine au XVIII^e siècle*, 234-240.

²⁶ Hegel, *Idle Talk*, back cover.

²⁷ Hegel's translation of the title is “In Detail, Rector Chen Discourses on the Cosmos”. I did not use his translation here, on one hand to be more literal, and on the other hand to avoid the word “rector” which can be too evocative of Church institutions.

²⁸ Hegel's translation is “Unbending Chen”, “No Ghosts Chen”. Hegel, *Idle Talk*, 188. The name is also reminiscent of another narrow-minded “Chen *zhaizhang*,” who appeared in Tang Xianzu's 湯顯祖 *Peony Pavilion* [*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭] as the heroin Du Liniang's tutor. Aina may well have been acquainted with this play and paid a discreet tribute to it. See in English, Cyril Birch's translation *Peony Pavilion* (Cheng & Tsui Company/Indiana University Press, 1999), 11ff. Tang Xianzu's Chen *zhaizhang* made his first appearance in scene four, “*Fu tan* 腐嘆 [Pedant's Lament]”.

the villagers' request, Chen settles down and started to speak on the state of the world "before there was a Heaven and an Earth [未有天地以來]"²⁹.

Hence the greatest part of the chapter unfolds as a lecture, punctuated by short questions from the audience, almost devoid of narrative. Contrasting with the lively vernacular language of the previous chapters, Chen's language is formal and infused with Neo-Confucian terminology to which we shall return later. He starts by outlining his own cosmology – a cosmos which took shape out of an indistinct "Wuji 無極" with heavenly bodies floating in an empty space. This view of a self-regulating, godless world governed by impersonal laws prompted questions from the villagers: where should one locate the many widely worshiped deities in such a universe? Can this teaching be reconciled with the Buddhist belief of the transmigration of souls, or the Taoist promise of immortality? No, Chen asserts, there are no such things as afterlife, underworld, or immortal spirits. All beings are constituted of *qi* originating from the cosmos, and to the cosmos they shall ultimately return. Buddhism, Taoism and popular religions are all pernicious inventions to deceive the credulous. Two thirds of the chapter consists of diatribes against these religions, depicting Buddha's and Laozi's purportedly ignominious birth, rejecting Buddhist and Taoist doctrines, and accusing adepts of these religions for lack of filial piety as well as subversion against the state.

Chen goes on to offer physical explanations of supernatural events the villagers submit to him. All can be explicated as works of *qi*: deceased heroes perform prodigies by virtue of their own "*qi* of justice 正氣"; sorcerers divert such power to their own ends. However, the cosmos also follows a grander cyclical course from generation to destruction: calamities will of necessity befall mankind to contain its proliferation, typically by means of barbarian invasions – a somber allusion to the latest Manchu conquest. Hearing this, the villagers thank Chen for his instructions, while cautioning him against the risks he runs by maintaining such heterodoxy. Chen

²⁹ Hegel, *Idle Talk*, 189.

leaves, disappointed, and the villagers are left in disarray: they now fear that their gatherings and Chen's lecture will come to the ear of the authorities. In the confusion, the bean arbor falls down and the villagers scatter. An old man ends the book with a sigh, echoing a then wide-spread self-criticism among Chinese literati that their vanity and partisanship was responsible for the collapse of Ming world order:

天下事被此老迂偏僻之論敗壞者多矣，不獨此一豆棚也。

[“Far more things in this world have been destroyed by such old nonsense than just this one bean arbor!”³⁰]

We should agree with scholars cited above in saying that *Doupeng xianhua* is an outstanding piece of Ming-Qing vernacular literature. It offers at once a lively depiction of a rural community and a reflection on broader Chinese history; it also shows acute awareness towards narrative structure and language style. The last chapter is itself a complex, polyphonic text, a full-fledged “fiction of ideas” as Hanan terms it,³¹ written by a literatus for like-minded readers sharing both his culture and intellectual concerns.

In this respect, we should not be so surprised that this chapter of the *Doupeng xianhua* was translated by a European missionary as a “philosophical dialogue”: it does allow for such a reading. We should first remember that in early modern and Enlightenment Europe, fictional dialogue was a common format for philosophical and scientific writings in the Platonic traditions. Illustrious representatives of the genre include Galileo's *Dialogue concerning the Two Chief World Systems* (1632), Thomas Hobbes's *Dialogus Physicus* (1661), Bishop Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (ca. 1751), etc.³² This format allows for a vivid presentation of contradictory points

³⁰ Hegel, *Idle Talk*, 207.

³¹ Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 195.

³² Youd makes a similar point that both China and Europe had a longstanding tradition of philosophical writing in the dialogue form, and therefore it is not surprising that Dentrecolles presented *Doupeng xianhua* in this light (Youd, “*Jieyu xiaoshuo yu fei xiaoshuo zhijian*”, 319). His article argues also that the equivalence between the

of view, without the author taking sides himself. It could be used to popularize university teaching to a wider audience,³³ as well as to lend to scientific discourses a hint of literary nobility they did not usually possess in the early modern period.³⁴ This format of writing is also not alien to the Chinese tradition, in which Chan Buddhist and Neo-Confucian conversations (*yulu* 語錄) are great source of vernacular language literature. We may therefore take the Jesuit's view as a reminder that a comprehensive history of ideas should not be limited to formally philosophical disquisitions: the many ways ordinary people received, distorted or even played with sophisticated concepts also need to be accounted for.³⁵ *Doupeng xianhua* deserves a place in such a broadly construed history of ideas in Ming-Qing China.

Doupeng xianhua apparently enjoyed a rather significant circulation during the Qing period. To my knowledge, seven different woodblock editions were made by the early nineteenth century, including three undated and four dated ones from 1781, 1795, 1798 and 1805 respectively.³⁶ A drama collection entitled *Doupeng xianxi* 豆棚閒戲 [Idle Dramas under the Bean Arbor] was made during the Kangxi period.³⁷ Drawing inspiration from Chapter 5 (one of the conformist tales concerning the filial piety and

Western "novel" and the East Asian "*xiaoshuo* 小說", in essence a late Qing construction, should be traced back to seventeenth- and eighteenth century missionaries. While I fully agree that in general the missionaries were the first to equate traditional Chinese *xiaoshuo* with early modern French *roman*, I think Youd misconstrues the French by maintaining that Dentrecolles did somehow present *Doupeng xianhua* as a *xiaoshuo*. The *Description* introduces this translation in these terms: "*Ce Dialogue, où ce Philosophe explique ses sentimens sur l'origine & l'état du Monde, est le douzième entretien: car son Ouvrage en renferme plusieurs sur d'autres matieres d'Histoire & de Morale, qui ne font rien au sujet présent.*" [This Dialogue, wherein the Philosopher explains his Sentiments concerning the Origin and State of the World, is the 12th Discourse: for his Work contains several others on Historical and Moral Subjects, which have no Relation to this.] The phrase "*matieres d'Histoire & de Morale*" (Historical and Moral Subjects), which according to Youd is a defensible rendition of the Chinese *xiaoshuo*, does not actually describe the genre to which *Doupeng xianhua* belongs, but only the content of the other chapters which were also categorized as "*entretiens*".

³³ See, for example, Andrew Cunningham and Sachiko Kusukawa (ed.), *Natural philosophy epitomised: Books 8-11 of Gregor Reisch's Philosophical pearl (1503)*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), a textbook written as a dialogue between a professor and his pupil.

³⁴ Christophe Martin, *Présentation to Fontenelle, Dialogue sur la pluralité du monde* (Paris, Flammarion, 1998), 23-25.

³⁵ For relevant methodological discussions, see in particular Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, *Zhongguo sixiangshi daolun: yiban zhishi, sixiang yu xinyang shijie de lishi* 中國思想史導論：一般知識、思想與信仰世界的歷史, (Shanghai, Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1999), vol. 1, 9-24.

³⁶ I have consulted five copies belonging to three woodblock editions: the 1798 Baoningtang 寶寧堂 edition in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (BnF Chinois 4282), in SOAS, London (RM c.357.t.11), and the online digital library of Tokyo University East Asian Library (雙紅堂-小說-41); two undated editions in the National Library of China (XD 9813, XD 5781). They are in all respects identical to each other apart from the size.

³⁷ Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 191. See also Sun Kaidi 孫楷第, *Zhongguo tongs xiaoshuo zongmu tiyao* 中國通俗小說總目提要, (Beijing, Zhongguo wenlian chuban gongsi, 1990), 410-412.

heroic altruism of a young beggar), a play entitled *Zhuan tian xin* 轉天心 [Turning the Heaven's Heart] was written by Tang Ying 唐英 (1682-1756), Superintendent of Jingdezhen Porcelain.³⁸ A collection of tales inspired by Aina and entitled *Xiao doupeng* 小豆棚 [Little Bean Arbor] appeared by 1800.³⁹ The Scottish missionary Robert Morrison (1782-1834) acquired a copy during his stay in Guangzhou and Macao between 1807 and 1823, which is today preserved in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.⁴⁰ However, it is unclear how much the daring challenge of *Doupeng xianhua* to sanctified legends, its loyalist undertone, and its tormented reflection on the cosmological significance of the fall of the Ming was received by contemporaneous readers. The French translation published in 1735 thus offers exceptional insights into its reception in early eighteenth century.

3. The translator François-Xavier Dentrecolles

We know substantially more about the Jesuit translator François-Xavier Dentrecolles than about Aina. Born in Limoges in 1664, and having entered the Society of Jesus in 1687, Dentrecolles arrived in China in 1699 and spent nearly twenty years in northern Jiangxi, near Raozhou 饒州, as a countryside missionary. He moved to Beijing in late 1719, and after several years during which he seemed to have occasionally travelled back to Jiangxi, he definitively settled in the imperial capital by the middle of the year 1720 when evangelization was banned in the provinces, and stayed there until his death in 1741.⁴¹ As a missionary, Dentrecolles was an influential figure. He was the superior of the French Jesuit mission during the turbulent years from 1707 to 1719, when the survival of Catholicism in China was

³⁸ Wang Ailing 王璦玲, "Gai kundiao tiaohetie sizhu tiandao renxin - lun Tang Ying xiju jiaohuaguan yu qi jingdianxing siwei de jiangou" "改昆調合絲竹天道人心"——論唐英戲劇教化觀與其經典性思維的建構 in *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 中國文哲研究集刊 32/3, 2008, 73-108.

³⁹ Hegel, *Idle Talk*, xxii.

⁴⁰ SOAS, RM c.357.t.11. The copy does not contain any annotation or marks of reading from Morrison.

⁴¹ On Dentrecolles's itinerary and his scholarship see Madame Yves Thomaz de Bossierre, *François Xavier Dentrecolles (Yin Hong-Siu Ki-Tsong) et l'apport de la Chine à l'Europe du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1982); Wu, "Les traductions de F.-X. Dentrecolles, S.J. (1664-1741)".

menaced by the “Chinese Rite Controversy” – a controversy within Catholic Europe concerning the Jesuits’ “accommodation” to certain aspects of Confucianism which had by then degenerated into a diplomatic crisis between Rome and Beijing.⁴²

Dentrecolles also left a considerable legacy in the history of European knowledge about China. Best-known for his report on Jingdezhen porcelain technique, he also wrote on a wide range of topics, covering China’s social life as well as various technical and medical know-hows. These reports quoted extensively from Chinese texts, making Dentrecolles one of the most prolific translators among the missionaries of his generation.⁴³ Most relevant to our topic is his translation of four stories from the *Jingu qiguan* 今古奇觀 [*Wonderful Stories of Old and Modern Times*], also published in the *Description*, yet in a different section devoted to “[le] gout des Chinois pour la poésie, pour l’histoire et pour les pièces de théâtres [taste of the Chinese for poetry, history and plays]”, and unambiguously identified as moral tales – “des petites histoires propres à amuser d’une manière agréable & utile [little Histories (which) set forth for Instruction and Entertainment]”, “à peu-près semblable à nos Romans [not unlike our Romances or Novels]”, and very fitting for “reformer les mœurs [reform the Manners]”.⁴⁴

We can easily perceive the appeal of Aina’s text to a missionary. The questions raised by the villagers in the story – the origin of the universe, the existence of the afterlife, the working of prodigies and the intervention of a providential god in human affairs – must have been frequent subjects of discussion between the missionary and his Chinese interlocutors. Chen’s anti-religious arguments must also have sounded familiar, as they regularly appeared in Chinese anti-Christian literature as well.⁴⁵ The Jesuit might have found some affinity between Chen’s experience and his own, as a

⁴² For the “Chinese Rite Controversy”, see Nicolas Standaert (ed.), *Handbook of Christianity in China* (Leiden, Brill, 2001), 680-688. Landry-Deron in *La prevue par la Chine* has analyzed the production of *Description* in 1735 as chiefly a product of this controversy.

⁴³ For Dentrecolles’s translation in the field of science and technology, see Wu, *Traduire la Chine au XVIII^e siècle*, 322-368.

⁴⁴ *Description* (French) III, 290-292; (English) II, 146-147.

⁴⁵ Jacques Gernet, *China and the first Christian impact*, translated by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), 193-213.

learned foreigner preaching in a rural community. This being said, we have no direct evidence of how Dentrecolles encountered *Doupeng xianhua*, nor the exact edition he used. The eighteenth-century catalogue of Chinese books in the Bibliothèque du Roi in Paris did not contain this title;⁴⁶ the copy today preserved at the Bibliothèque nationale is of the 1798 edition.⁴⁷ Dentrecolles's manuscript did not survive.⁴⁸ Fortunately, in an undated letter signed "Anth. Cottin" and addressed to the orientalist Louis-Matthieu Langlès (1763-1824, curator of oriental manuscripts of the Bibliothèque du Roi under the Revolution, the First Empire and the Restauration⁴⁹), Dentrecolles's manuscript was described as then still accessible in a private collection.⁵⁰ Cottin quoted one sentence from the cover letter Dentrecolles sent with the translation: "*Dans mon église à Jao Tchou un jeune lettré athée [sic.] et c'est le 3eme que j'ai rencontré de cette espèce durant 24 ans de mission* [in my church of Raozhou a young Atheist literatus and this is the third of this species I have encountered during 24 years of mission]".⁵¹ This allows us to date the making of the translation to around 1723, a time when Dentrecolles was sharing his time between Beijing and Jiangxi.

Dentrecolles's translation shows a remarkable mastery of the Chinese language. However, his reading significantly differed from that of modern scholars. He apparently paid no attention to its highly acclaimed metanarrative framework: only the final chapter was translated, occluding the architecture of the work as a whole. Dentrecolles also showed little interest in Aina's loyalism to the Ming, although decades earlier, conflicting loyalties to Southern Ming regimes and to the Qing had

⁴⁶ An early eighteenth century catalogue of Chinese books of the Bibliothèque du Roi can be found in E. Fourmont and A. Huang, *Linguae Sinarum Mandarinicae hieroglyphicae grammatica duplex, latinè, & cum characteribus sinensium, item Sinicorum Regiae Bibliothecae librorum catalogus denuo, cum Notitiis amplioribus & characteribus sinico...* (Paris, chez Louis Guerin, Rollin fils & Joseph Bullot, 1742).

⁴⁷ BnF Chinois 4282.

⁴⁸ For a list of remaining manuscripts that have served for the compilation of the *Description*, see Landry-Deron, *La preuve par la Chine*, 383-386, and 231 for this specific text.

⁴⁹ Frédéric Hitzel, "Langlès, Louis-Matthieu", in F. Pouillon (ed.), *Dictionnaire des orientalistes de langue française*, (Paris, Karthala Editions, 2012), 593-594.

⁵⁰ BnF, NAF 22169, f°51. Cottin spoke of "*la famille dont je tiens ces deux manuscrits* [the family from whom I hold these two manuscripts]".

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

also torn the Jesuit China mission apart.⁵² Dentrecolles was not unaware of the sensitivity of the issue, though. Translating the final question from the audience, regarding a supernatural event that purportedly advantaged the Jurchen Jin 金 dynasty (1115-1234) on its way to conquering China, Dentrecolles explained matter-of-factly in a footnote, that the Jin were “*Ancêtres des Mantchoux, qui se rendirent Maîtres de la plus grande partie de la Chine & qui furent ensuite presque tous exterminés par les Tartares Occidentaux.*”⁵³ He could read “Manchu” under the code word “Jurchen”, and must have understood what was at stake. However, we cannot fathom how the missionary understood the impact of the Ming-Qing transition on the Chinese mind.

What we can affirm is that his interest seemed exclusively philosophical rather than historical. This has three observable consequences on the translation: the modification of the portraits of the characters; the meticulous work on the philosophical terminology; and the creation of a huge paratext of translator’s footnotes.

Repainting portrayals of characters

In the history of translation in France, the seventeenth and eighteenth century is generally known as the age of the “*belles infidèles* [unfaithful beauties]”, during which translators enjoyed considerable liberty to rewrite, cut down or add to their originals in order to conform to the aesthetic standards of their countrymen.⁵⁴ The Jesuit translators published in the *Description* are no exception. For instance, as Landry-Deron has observed, Dentrecolles’s translation of one tale in the *Jingu qiguan* not only simplified the plot to a degree, but also perfected the image of one virtuous

⁵² There is a sizable literature on the topic. For an overview, see Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit mission to China, 1579-1724* (Cambridge: Belknap press of Harvard university, 2007), 92-124.

⁵³ *Description* (French) III, 62-63, (English) I, 687. “Western Tartars” signify Mongols. “Ancestors of the Manchus, Masters of the greater Part of China, but afterwards almost extirpated by the Western Tartars.”

⁵⁴ Yves Chevrel *et al.* (eds.), *Histoire des traductions en langue française, XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles (1610-1815)* (Paris: Verdier, 2014), 379-383.

protagonist, omitting to mention the venereal disease he once contracted.⁵⁵

We can notice similar rewritings in his translation of the *Doupeng xianhua*. Some historical allusions are simplified: while the professor Chen of the Chinese original quotes a list of sectarian rebellion leaders in Chinese history in his anti-religious diatribes,⁵⁶ the French translation, quite understandably, omitted all particular names, preserving only the dynasties under which they flourished.⁵⁷ The colloquial speech of Jiangnan folk gave away to a ponderous French. Yet more significant changes occurred to the portrayal of actors under the bean arbor, first and foremost, that of the Professor Chen. In the French translation, Chen appears in a neutral, rather than negative light. The literal meaning of Chen's nickname as "No Ghost" is interestingly left unexplained in its transliteration *Tchin vou kouei*, which contradicts Dentrecolles's own practice vis-à-vis other vernacular stories: in his translation of *Jingu qiguan*, characters named Lü Yu 呂玉 and Lü Bao 呂寶 did become "*Liu le Diamant*" and "*Liu le Trésor*".⁵⁸ The irony and self-doubt pervading Aina's writing are expunged as well. The concluding criticism voiced by the elderly peasant against the literatus disappeared, as the translation stopped at the point when Chen left the arbor. Chen's insolence is smoothed over.⁵⁹ In the original, when he is invited by the villagers to deliver a lecture, Chen's reaction is described as follows:

齋長聽老者這番說話，卻似挑動疥癩瘡窠一般，連聲道：『予豈好辯哉？亦不得已也。』對眾人將手一拱，竟到中央椅上坐了，道：『老仁翁要我從那裏說起？』

⁵⁵ Landry-Deron, *La preuve par la Chine*, 333. The story translated is *Lü dalang huan jin wan gurou* 呂大郎還金完骨肉 [Lü the Elder returns gold and reunites with his offspring].

⁵⁶ The list includes "漢時張陵、張角；元時韓林兒、徐增壽；及明時唐賽兒、趙古元、徐鴻儒。[Zhang Ling and Zhang Jiao during the Han Dynasty, Han Lin'er and Xu Zengshou during the Yuan Dynasty, as well as Tang Sai'er, Zhao Guyuan and Xu Hongru during the Ming Dynasty]".

⁵⁷ "... sous la Dynastie des Han, deux rebelles causerent une infinie de désastres, qui furent renouvellez sous la Dynastie des Yuen, & plus récemment sous le regne des Ming par d'autres Chefs de révolte...[during the Han Dynasty, two Rebels causes infinite Mischief; which were renewed under that of the Ywen, and more lately in the Reign of the Ming, by other Ringleaders of Rebellion..." *Description* (French) III, 54; (English) I, 673.

⁵⁸ *Description* (French) III, 292.

⁵⁹ Youd also points out that the irony surrounding the characters of Chen disappeared, though without citing evidence. Youd, "*Jieyu xiaoshuo yu fei xiaoshuo zhijian*", 320.

[Hearing the old man speak in this manner, as quick as if irritated by a rash or a boil, the professor said with the next breath, “How could I rightly be ‘disputatious’ on this matter? Indeed, I must do so.” Saluting the crowd, he went over and sat down on the central chair, saying, “Where should I begin, good sir?”⁶⁰

In the French translation, the conversation begins in perfect courtesy:

*“Je le veux bien, répondit le Philosophe : tout ce que je crains, c’est de ne pas répondre à votre attente. Il salua en même-tems la compagnie, & alla s’asseoir dans la place honorable qu’on lui avoit destinée. Sur quel sujet voulez-vous, dit-il, que je vous entretienne ?”*⁶¹

More importantly, in the French translation, there is a more clear-cut identification between groups of characters and particular religious beliefs, and a heightened confrontation between them. This redistribution is done from the outset, as soon as Chen appears in the arbor. The immediate reaction of the villagers to this self-invited guest, according to the Chinese text, is as follows:

眾人俱是面面相覷，不知甚麼來歷。

[The audience all looked at one another, without the slightest inkling of where he had gotten that idea.⁶²]

The French version offers an interpretation:

Tous ceux de l’Assemblée se regardent les uns les autres avec surprise : car l’étranger avoit peu de capacité... les autres étoient gens sans Lettres, attachez à la Secte de *Fo*, ou de *Lao*, & fort entêtez de leurs Idoles.⁶³

⁶⁰ Hegel, *Idle Talk*, 189.

⁶¹ *Description* (French) III, 43; (English) I, 666: “‘I am very ready to oblige you’, replied the Philosopher, ‘all I fear, is, that I shall fall short of Expectation.’ At the same time he saluted the Company, and sitting down in the honourable Place which was appointed him: ‘upon what Subject, sayd he, shall I entertain you?’”

⁶² Hegel, *Idle Talk*, 188.

⁶³ *Ibidem*. “At this Harangue the whole Assembly looked upon each other with some Surprise; for the Stranger

This characterization of the miniature society under the bean arbor is in keeping with the Jesuits' hierarchical understanding of Chinese society. At the top of society is the "sect of the literati", holders of both learning and power, while the petty people "of no Learning" were prey to Buddhism and Taoism, idolatrous religions which the Catholic missionaries have set forth to combat.

The French translation also radicalized the confrontation between Chen and the villagers. This can be seen in the use of possessive pronouns, which are systematically added in the French version where the Chinese original has none. To take the example of but one question raised by the audience -

眾人道：『玉皇即上帝也。書上說，武丁夢上帝賜傳說……明明的是有上帝矣。』

[A member of the crowd said, "The Jade Emperor is the Lord on High. It says in the books that King Wuding dreamed that he Lord on High presented him with Fu Yue... Clearly there *is* a Lord on High.⁶⁴]

The Jesuit translates:

Mais, dit l'un des assistans au nom de tous les autres, comment osez-vous traiter avec tant de mépris notre *Yo hoang*? C'est le même que le *Chang ti*, dont il est parlé dans vos Livres, pour lesquels vous avez une si profonde vénération ; c'est lui que l'Empereur *Kao tsong* vit en songe, & qui lui donna *Fou yué* pour son premier Ministre... Oserez-vous nier qu'il y ait un *Chang ti*?⁶⁵

In the Chinese original, there is no sharp antagonism between the Confucian

[the narrator of the previous chapter] had but a moderate Capacity... the rest were Men of no Learning, but Followers of the sect of *Fo* [Buddhists] or *Lao* [Taoists], and very fond of their idols."

⁶⁴ Hegel, *Idle Talk*, 201.

⁶⁵ *Description* (French) III, 56, (English) I, 673: "But, said one of the Auditors [in the name of all others], How dare you treat [our] *Yo hwong* with so much Contempt, since he is the same as *Shang ti*, mentioned in your books, for whom you have so profound a Veneration? It is he the Emperor *Kao tsong* saw in a Dream, and who gave him *Fû yué* for his Prime Minister... Dare you deny that there is a *Shang ti*?"

philosopher and the idolatrous folk, between “your” teaching and “our” deities. The villagers hold a syncretic view that accommodates Buddha, Taoist divinities and Confucian Sage Kings alike. Their questions are respectful, inquisitive, rather than polemical. More than a “dialogue”, the French translation dramatized the text into a disputation between rival doctrines.

Situating the philosophical concepts

In sum, Dentrecolles took a degree of liberty with the narrative device of the chapter he translated. However, the philosophical terminology involved also posed a special challenge to the translator of this text – much more than, say, the moralistic tales in the *Jingu qiguan*. And we shall observe that Dentrecolles adopted a very different strategy while handling these concepts.

The first repartee between Chen and the villagers can serve as an epitome of such challenge. At the latter’s request of a lecture concerning the world “before there was Heaven and Earth”, Chen’s answer goes:

未有天地以前，太空無窮之中渾然一氣，乃為無極；無極之虛氣，
即為太極之理氣；太極之理氣，即為天地之根竅。

[Before there were Heaven and Earth, in the middle of the Supreme Void and the Limitless there was one undifferentiated *qi*, which was the Non-Polar (*wuji*). The vacuous *qi* of the Non-Polar is none other than the *qi* of Principle (*li*) of the Supreme Polar (*taiji*). The *qi* of Principle (*li*) of the Supreme Polar is none other than the roots and sprouts of Heaven and Earth.⁶⁶]

Aina outlines here a Neo-Confucian cosmogony that would be recognizable to any literatus, with its terminology (*wuji*, *taiji*, *li*, *qi*...) and overall pattern. There was

⁶⁶ My translation. I did not use Hegel’s more literary translation in this particular place (Hegel, *Idle Talk*, 189) facilitate comparison with the historical Neo-Confucian corpus and their English translations by adopting the same terminology as William T. D. Bary and Irene Cohen, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2000).

a starting point when *Wuji* became *Taiji*; an all-permeating material-force (*qi*) that both constitutes and vitalizes myriad things; a principle (*li*) ordering and unifying natural and human worlds. Despite the fictive *context*, we are indeed faced with a philosophical *text*.

If it is easy to perceive the germinal link between this speech and “Neo-Confucian” philosophy, it is much harder to further the analysis and assign it to a specific place within Neo-Confucian genealogy. Taken individually, each statement in this paragraph can be glossed with the historical Neo-Confucian corpus. The passage from “*Wuji*” to “*Taiji*” strongly evokes the controversial opening of Zhou Dunyi’s 周敦頤 (1017–1073) *Taiji tu shuo* 太極圖說 [Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Polar]: “Non-Polar and yet Supreme Polar 無極而太極”⁶⁷. The way that the “*qi*” immanent from a “Supreme Void” congeals to form men and things before scattering again into the “Supreme Void” upon their death should readily remind us of Zhang Zai’s 張載 (1020-1077) citation, “*qi* of necessity integrates to become the myriad things, things of necessity disintegrate and become the Supreme Vacuity. [氣不能不聚而為萬物，萬物不能不散而為太虛]”⁶⁸. But attempts to interpret this speech can be fundamentally undermined by its sarcastic undertone. Was it written “seriously” at all, intended to be read as a coherent discourse? Or was Aina only mimicking what he saw as the empty speculation of contemporary literati? Were his inconsistencies deliberate? What we can suggest is perhaps precisely this ambivalence, which, like all acts of parody, “may entail not only a mixture of criticism and sympathy for the parodied text, but also the creative expansion of it into something new”.⁶⁹

Bearing in mind these interpretive uncertainties, let us turn to Dentrecolles’s translation:

⁶⁷ De Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 673.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 685. Wang Fuzhi 王夫之, *Zhangzi zheng meng zhu* 張子正蒙注 [Commentaire du Rectifier les ignorances juvéniles du Maître Zhang], annotated by Zhang Xichen 章錫琛 (Beijing, Guji chubanshe, 1956), 5.

⁶⁹ Margaret A. Rose, *Parody, Ancient, Modern, Post-Modern* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 51.

“Le Ciel & la Terre n'étoient point encore, lorsqu'au milieu d'un vuide immense, il n'y avoit qu'une substance extrêmement confuse ; *Hoen gen y ki* Cette substance en cet état de cahos [sic.], est l'illimité, le non-borné, *Vou ki* : ce qu'il y a de subtil & de spiritueux dans cette masse indéfinie, est comme la forme *Li ki*, & l'ame du *Tai ki*, du premier & suprême état de l'Univers, a été justement le principe du Ciel & de la Terre, le germe qui les a fait éclore.”⁷⁰

This is painstaking rendition. All the key concepts – “*Vou ki*”, “*Tai ki*”, “*Li ki*” – are transliterated; some of them are also followed with an explanatory gloss – *Wuji* as “the borderless, the limitless”, and *Taiji* as “the first and supreme State of the Universe”. In contrast to the freedom Dentrecolles took while dealing with the narrative device of the chapter, his strategy with philosophical concepts is resolutely literalistic. The result is not the least bit reader-friendly. Knud Lundbæk, the only historian of the Jesuit mission who has so far seriously analyzed this document, found it “corrupted and illegible” to lay readers⁷¹.

We should nonetheless not conclude outright that Dentrecolles failed to understand the original. After all, foreignization has become a norm in today's Chinese studies. Modern scholars do agree to render *Taiji*, *li* and *qi* phonetically in order to denote their originality.⁷² Dentrecolles's transliteration, systematic throughout the whole text, should be better understood as a deliberate choice to create an effect of estrangement.

But the similarity is only apparent between the eighteenth-century Jesuit and modern scholars: we can observe that the paraphrases Dentrecolles added to these Neo-Confucian terms are all closely associated with *non-Aristotelian* natural

⁷⁰ *Description* (French) III, 43; (English) I, 666. “Before the Heavens and the Earth were yet formed, there was in the midst of an immense Void, nothing but an extremely confused Substance, *When jen y ki* [*hunran yi qi*]. This Substance in this chaotic State was the indefinite and boundless, *Vu ki*: That which was subtle and spirituous in this indefinite Mass, being as it were the Form *Li ki*; and the Soul of the *Tai ki*, the first and supreme State of the Universe, was the very principle of the Heavens and Earth, or the Bud which disclosed them: By the same Means an infinite Number of Beings were produced.”

⁷¹ Lundbæk, “Image du néo-confucianisme”, 143.

⁷² Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History, a New Manual*, (Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2013), 55, on translating philosophical, scientific and medical terms from Chinese to Western languages.

philosophies, which were considered heterodox by the Catholic Church at that time and therefore had derogatory connotations. For instance, *Wuji* is glossed as a state of “chaos” – a widespread belief among Greek and Roman philosophers that prior to the creation of the world was a pre-existing formless matter.⁷³ From a purely scholarly point of view, the comparison between the Neo-Confucian *Wuji* and the Greek “Chaos” is not pointless. However, an eighteenth-century Jesuit could not have spoken of “Chaos” without bearing in mind that this idea had been rejected by the Church Fathers since the second century AD, and definitively condemned by the Fourth Council of Lateran in 1215 when the doctrine of Creation *ex nihilo* became dogma.⁷⁴ Another case in point is the expression “Soul of *Tai ki*”. By giving Taiji a “soul”, the Jesuit clearly had in mind the concept of *Anima Mundi*, or World Soul, the proponents of which ranged from Greek Stoics to Renaissance Neo-Platonists. They shared the conception of “an enchanted world of ensouled objects”, in which “a universal world-soul pervades all creation and makes all creatures, even rocks and stones, alive and sentient in some degree”.⁷⁵ This doctrine had also been condemned as contrary to the strict dualism that the Church maintained between the material and the spiritual, the created world and the Creator. In brief, by resorting to these concepts of non-Aristotelian natural philosophies, Dentrecolles was translating a Neo-Confucian discourse into something that would qualify as a heresy back in Catholic Europe.

These equivalences were not invented by Dentrecolles in 1723. Among earlier generations of Jesuits in China, Niccolò Longobardo (1565-1655) wrote in 1624 a full-fledged report decrying the “atheism” of contemporary Chinese literati, and interpreted the notion of Taiji as “chaos”.⁷⁶ In the preface to the *Confucius Sinarum*

⁷³ “Chaos”, D. Diderot and J. le Rond d'Alembert (eds.), *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2013 Edition), Robert Morrissey (ed.), <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.

⁷⁴ Gerhardt May, *Monotheism and Creation*, in M. Mitchell and F. Young (ed.), *Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 1: *From Origin to Constantine* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 434-437.

⁷⁵ Brian Copenhaver and C. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), 288.

⁷⁶ Niccolò Longobardo, *Traité sur quelques points de la religion des Chinois, Par le R. Pere Longobardi, ancien supérieur des missions de la Compagnie de Jesus à la Chine* (Paris, chez Louis Guérin, posthumous publication in 1701), 28, 32. The text of originally composed by 1624 as an internal report written in Portuguese. For the context of its redaction, publication, and its contribution to European knowledge about Neo-Confucianism, see Lundbæk,

Philosophus (1687), Philippe Couplet (1623?-1693) cautioned his readers against the atheism of Neo-Confucian cosmology, which he compared with “what crazy Serveto claimed in his sixth letter to Jean Calvin, that God is properly a stone inside a stone, a trunk inside a trunk”⁷⁷. However, Dentrecolles’s generation also pushed further the search for equivalences between Eastern and Western heterodoxies. They found fresh resources in a rising new philosophy of seventeenth century Europe that the Church authority looked on with suspicion: Cartesianism. Dentrecolles later explained this to Du Halde, evoking an “*ouvrage entier d’un athée chinois* [entire work of a Chinese Atheist]” he had previously translated: “*Le Li transformé seulement en troisieme element de Descartes deviendrait intelligible à bien des gens* [The *li* would only become intelligible to many people, if transformed into the Third Element of Descartes (1596-1650)]”⁷⁸ – meaning the grossest of three particles which, in the Cartesian terminology of mechanical physics, are classified by descending degree of subtlety. Certain terms in the *Doupeng xianhua* indeed seem to have undergone such a “transformation”: the *yang* is glossed as “*les parties les plus subtiles* [the more subtle particles]”, and the *yin*, “*les parties les plus grossières* [the more gross particles]”.⁷⁹ While in the original text, Chen maintains, concerning the formation of the Earth and the Heaven out of *yin* and *yang*:

陰凝聚於中，而水泥變化，五行皆備。陽浮動包羅於外，運旋上下。

[The *yin* congealed and concentrated in the middle, water and earth changed and transformed, the five Phases were in place. Yang floated, enveloped from the outside, moved, fluttered about up and down.]

“Image du néo-confucianisme”, 140, and Pan Feng-Chuan, “The interpretation and the re-interpretation of Chinese philosophy: Longobardo and Leibniz”, N. Golvers and S. LinkLievens (ed.), *A lifelong dedication to the China mission: Essays presented in honor of Father Jerom Heyndrickx, CICM, on the occasion of his 75th birthday and the 25th anniversary of the F. Verbiest Institute K.U. Leuven* (Leuven, Ferdinand Verbiest Institute K.U. Leuven, 2007), 491-514.

⁷⁷ Meynard, *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, 157.

⁷⁸ BnF, Ms Fr 17238, f°11, Dentrecolles to Du Halde, 8th October 1737. At least one other China Jesuit of this time – Joseph de Prémare (1665-1737) – also explicitly compared Neo-Confucianism to Cartesianism. See Prémare to Fr. **, n.d., *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses concernant l’Asie, l’Afrique et l’Amérique* (Paris: Société du Panthéon Littéraire, 1843), tome 3, 591.

⁷⁹ *Description* (French) III, 45; (English) 667.

Dentrecolles's translation went:

“Revenons aux premières combinaisons du monde: ce genre de corpuscules qui font ce qu'on appelle Yin, s'étant attachez & ajustez les uns auprès des autres ; la Terre, l'eau s'en formerent, & les cinq Elemens vinrent à exister. L'Yang, & les atômes les plus déliez resterent suspendus, & embrasserent toute cette lourde masse, voltigeans, & roulans sans cesse tout autour.”⁸⁰

Aina's original text provides little justification for *yin* and *yang* to be interpreted as subtle or gross “particles”, “atoms” and “corpuscles” which can be “fitted to each other” like pieces of a machine. This terminology becomes more clearly situated, if compared to a similar account on the formation of the Earth we can find in *Les Principes de Philosophie de M. Descartes* (1681), the only treatise of Cartesian philosophy that the French Jesuits' library in Beijing was known to possess: “...*les moins subtiles parties de sa matiere s'attachans peu à peu les unes aux autres, se font assemblées sur sa superficie* [The less subtle particles of this matter, little by little attached to each other, assembled themselves on the surface (of the Earth)]”; “...*l'air n'est autre chose qu'un amas des parties du troisième élément, qui sont si déliée... qu'elles obéissent à tous les mouvemens de la matiere du Ciel* [air is nothing else than a heap of particles of the third element, which are so fine... that they obey to all movement of the matter of the Heaven] – this matter of Heaven which “*roule continuellement autour d'elles* [wheel around them continuously]”.⁸¹ There is indeed a degree of similarity between Cartesian and Neo-Confucian natural philosophies which later scholars also noticed.⁸² However, for the Catholic Church in the

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*. “Let's return to the first Combination of the World: These kinds of Corpuscles which make of what is called *In* being joined and fitted to each other; the Earth, Water was formed of it, and the Five Elements began to exist. The *Yang* and the smallest Atoms remained suspended and surrounded all this inactive Mass, fluttering and wheeling around about it without ceasing.”

⁸¹ *Les Principes de Philosophie de M. Descartes* (Paris: chez la veuve Bobin, 1681), 311, 313, 352. Hubert Verhaeren, *Catalogue de la Bibiothèque du Pé-t'ang* (Beijing, Imprimerie des Lazaristes, 1949), 62; National Library of China, Beitang 231.

⁸² Starting from William A. Parson Martin, *The Cartesian philosophy before Descartes* (Beijing: Pei-t'ang Press,

seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Cartesian mechanism, which interprets phenomena of the physical world in terms of size, shape and motion of particles rather than innate qualities, posed most importantly a theological issue, namely the physical reality of transubstantiation.⁸³ The Jesuit College of Clermont in Paris stated in 1665, against this scientific novelty: "... too much is attributed to the fortuitous concourse of corpuscles, which favors the Atheist", and under the new understanding of substance, "there can be no conversion of bread and wine in the Eucharist into the blood and body of Christ... which favors heretics".⁸⁴ "Innovators" in Europe and the "modern philosopher" in China were here again associated to each other by an act of translation, and condemned by the same token.

Making the translator's voice heard

Dentrecolles did not in the least seek to conceal his ideological agenda, which we have so far analyzed through his terminological choice. He made this agenda even clearer through an impressive body of footnotes – 34 in total, for a text merely 12 pages long. Some of these were functionally close to our conception of a "translator's note", which is to offer necessary and succinct explanations of contextual and cultural allusions: for instance, the explanation that the thirteenth century Jurchens were ancestors of Manchus, or that Yama is "the Pluton for idolatrous Chinese". Eight other notes offer phonetic transcriptions of a word or a phrase (one of them made possible the identification of *Doupeng xianhua*). However, the majority of these notes were extensive argumentation, in which Dentrecolles took the floor himself, to either applaud Chen's invective against the Buddhists, or to refute the latter's "Atheism".

1888).

⁸³ Transubstantiation is of course far from the only issue of disagreement between mechanical and Aristotelian explanations. For a succinct introduction, see Lawrence Principe, *The Scientific Revolution, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 86-92. Ancient atomism, a source of inspiration for early modern mechanical physics, was importantly associated to Epicurean texts, in particular Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*; however, Jesuit literature usually compared Taoism, rather than Neo-Confucianism, to Epicureanism. See, for example, *Description* (French) III, 16.

⁸⁴ Roger Ariew, "Descartes and the Jesuits: Doubt, Novelty, and the Eucharist", in Mordechai Feingold (ed.), *Jesuit Science and the Republic of Letters* (Boston, MIT Press, 2003), 179.

This practice of argumentative footnotes is not unusual among eighteenth-century translators, even those translating between European languages.⁸⁵ Yet Dentrecolles's notes in this particular translation far exceed all those of his brethren, as well as his own practice elsewhere.

The longest one of these argumentative footnotes addresses Chen's speech in which he maintained that mankind was generated by the working of *qi*, similar to the spontaneous generation of insects and worms out of rotten wood – a then widely held belief in China. Based on this, Dentrecolles wrote a footnote that occupies almost the entire page:

Figure 1. Dentrecolles's footnote setting forth his own worldview. (Courtesy of Getty Institute)

The argument developed in this note deserves scrutiny. After despising in passing the Chinese philosopher's ignorance of the oviparity of insects (and suggesting that he could be taught such scientific knowledge with a microscope), the Jesuit made in superlative terms his main charge, namely the Neo-Confucian's denial of a transcendent God and the physical world as intelligent design:

...Le Philosophe Chinois, comme tous ceux qui cherchent à éteindre la connoissance d'un premier Etre, est si foible dans son systeme, que pour le former, il suppose d'abord les principes les plus absurdes & les plus chimériques, & veut donner ses fictions pour des premieres véritéz. On voit bien qu'il avoit affaire à de pitoyables adversaires. Ce *Tai ki*... cette masse informe, ce suprême indéfini qui a précédé tous les Etres définis, subsiste-t-il par lui-même ? Est-il l'auteur de son Etre ? Cette portion la plus subtile du *Tai ki* s'est-elle donnée à elle-même le mouvement qu'elle imprime aux autres

⁸⁵ See for instance, Paola Bertucci, "The In/visible Woman : Mariangela Ardinghelli and the Circulation of Knowledge between Paris and Naples in the Eighteenth Century", in *Isis*, Vol. 104/2, 2013, p. 226-249. More generally on the use of translators' notes by missionaries in the *Description*, see Huiyi Wu, "Quand le traducteur se fait visible: essai d'analyse sur les notes de traducteurs dans la *Description de l'Empire de la Chine* de J.-B. Du Halde (Paris, 1735)", in R. Lanselle & A. Cazé (ed.), *Translation in an International Perspective: Cultural Interaction and Disciplinary Transformation* (Berne, Éditions Peter Lang, 2014), 51-81.

Etres, où l'a-t-elle reçu d'un autre Etre, qui a été le premier moteur ? [...] ⁸⁶

To hold these beliefs and refuse to recognize the existence of a Creator, Dentrecolles scorned, one must be “void both of Sense and Reason” –

Car enfin à la vûë d'un Palais, où la symétrie & les proportions sont exactement observées, osera-t-on dire que les pierres se sont assemblées dans ce bel ordre, & qu'elles se sont arrangées d'elles-mêmes d'une maniere propre à en distribuer les divers apartemens ; que les murs se sont élevez, & que la charpente s'est posée elle-même pour soutenir le toit, qui est venu ensuite se placer sur la charpente, en un mot, que ce Palais où éclate la plus parfaite Architecture, a été dressé par un de ces coups capricieux du hasard ? [...] ⁸⁷

The same argument, that the existence of an artificer ought to be deduced from the artfulness of a work, is then expanded into a lyrical ode of the earthly world as a wondrous divine creation. The exercise of eloquence ends with an irrevocable judgment: “To say that all this can be explained by certain Combinations of a most subtile Matter, imbued with an inherent animating Power, is to abuse Reason.” ⁸⁸

The speech is impressive by its length, aggressiveness and self-assurance; yet this rhetoric was again not of Dentrecolles's own devising. The model he seemed to have followed was Alessandro Valignano's (1539-1606) seminal text *Catechismus christianae fidei* (1586), written at the very beginning of the Jesuits' arrival in Japan and in China, which later served as blueprint for Jesuit catechisms around East Asia:

⁸⁶ *Description* (French) III, 44; (English) I, 666, note †: “Our Philosopher, like all those who endeavour to suppress the Knowledge of the first Cause, is so weak in his System, that to form it he lay down the most absurd and chimerical Principles, and would have his Fictions pass for fundamental Truths. Whence one may see he had to do with very despicable Adversaries. Is this *Tay ki*... this shapeless Mass, this supreme Indefinite which precedes all finite Beings, self existant? Was it the author of its own being? Has this most subtile Part of *Tay ki*, bestowed on itself the Motion which it gives to other Beings, or has it received the same from some other Being which was the first Mover?”

⁸⁷ *Description* (French) III, 44; (English) I, 666, note †: “For on sight of a Palace, wherein Symetry and Proportion as nicely observed, would any one offer to assert that the Stones assembled in that curious Order, and ranged themselves so as to form the different Apartments? That the Wall and the Wood work erected themselves in order to support the Roof, which afterwards placed itself thereon? In a Word, that this Palace, furnished according to the most perfect Rules of Architecture, was the whimsical Effect of mere Chance?”

⁸⁸ *Description* (English) I, 666, note †; (French) III, 44.

“We inherently acknowledge that there exists a master, when we see things are well ordered and prudently disposed. Therefore, when we enter a house and see each item arranged in an orderly fashion... and other utensils are well distinguished and placed in proper order, we accept that there is someone who arranged all these things neatly.... We see in this world the surprising order and harmony of all things. For the sun, moon, and other constellations hold their movements and revolutions invariably, and the earth, water, air and all other things stay in their proper place with one another. Therefore, it is evident that there exists the one who created all these things in good order.”⁸⁹

One of these was Matteo Ricci's *Tian zhu shi yi* 天主實義 [*The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*] (1603), the first Jesuit catechism published in China, which Dentrecolles's generation of missionaries used as textbook for learning Chinese.⁹⁰ In Ricci's text, we already find similar condemnation of the Neo-Confucian cosmology centered on Taiji and *li* for its being devoid of the first mover:

若太極者，止解之以謂理，則不能為天地萬物之原矣.....試問盤古之前既有理在，何故閒空不動而生物乎？其後誰從激之使動？

[When we come to the Taiji we find that it is only explained in terms of *li*. It cannot therefore be the source of heaven, earth, and all things... If *li* existed prior to Pangu, why did it remain at leisure and not move to produce things? Who later stimulated it into activity?]⁹¹

⁸⁹ A. Valignano, *Catechismus christianae fidei*, 1586 (reprint Tenri University Press, 1972), Libri I, 9v-10r. English translation quoted in Ryuji Hiraoka, “Jesuits, Cosmology and Creation in Japan's ‘Christian Century’ (1549-1650)”, in Luis Saraiva and Catherine Jami (eds.), *History of Mathematical Sciences: Portugal and East Asia V* (forthcoming). More details on the Japanese side of the story, see *id.*, *Nambankei uchuronno gententeki kenkyu* 南蛮系宇宙論の原典的研究 [Textual Studies in Early Jesuit Cosmology in Japan], Fukuoka, Hana shoin, 2013.

⁹⁰ Huiyi Wu, “Language training and circulation of linguistic knowledge in the Chinese mission by 1700: a case study of the personal notebook of J.-F. Foucquet, S.J. (Borgia Latino 523, Biblioteca Vaticana)”, in Ferdinand Verbiest Institute (ed.), *History of the Catholic Church in China: From its beginning to the Scheut Fathers and the 20th century. Unveiling some less known sources, sounds and pictures* (Leuven, Ferdinand Verbiest Institute, 2015), 210-213; Wu, *Traduire la Chine au XVIII^e siècle*, 117-121.

⁹¹ Matteo Ricci, S. J., *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-chu Shih-i)*, translated by D. Lancashire and P. Hu Kuo-chen, (St. Louis, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 110-111.

When it comes to offer rational evidence for the validity of the Christian teaching, the “House” metaphor was already employed:

“凡物不能自成,必須外為者以成之。樓臺房屋不能自起,恒成于工匠之手。知此,則天地不能自成,定有所為製作者,即吾所謂天主也。

[Material things cannot come to completion of their own volition, but must have a cause external to them to bring them to fruition; a pavilion or a house cannot rise of its own accord, but is always completed at the hands of artisans. When one comprehends this, one comes to understand that heaven and earth cannot come into being by their own will, but must assuredly have a creator, namely, our so-called Lord of Heaven].”⁹²

Thus rather than reflecting personal distaste, Dentrecolles’s attitude should be considered as deriving from a century-long corporative policy.⁹³ The “translator’s note” is far from the neutral, succinct and explicative footnotes our modern eyes are accustomed to, but a fully-fledged dissertation. Eighteenth-century translators were far from the “invisibility” today’s translators are sometimes said to be reduced to.⁹⁴

What was Dentrecolles up to?

We can perceive the divergence between two agendas, that of the author Aina and that of the French translator Dentrecolles. Aina seems to have aimed at a realistic depiction of the rural society he lived in as much as a subtle exposition of philosophical ideas. His relationship with the Professor Chen was ambivalent, with a mixture of intellectual affinity and human aversion. Chen’s Neo-Confucian beliefs probably reflected Aina’s own intellectual upbringing; however, the latter also conscientiously undermined the validity of the teaching by depicting Chen as an unlikable human being. For the Jesuit, on the contrary, it seems that the exposition of

⁹² *Ibid.*, 76-77, with minor modification of my own.

⁹³ More generally on the disagreement between missionaries and literati on matters of cosmology, particularly in the early stage of the Jesuit China mission, see Gernet, *China and the first Christian impact*, 193-213.

⁹⁴ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translators’ Invisibility, History of Translation* (New York, Rutledge, 1995).

ideas was all that mattered. The conversation was rewritten to some degree so that ideas and people could be associated in a more clear-cut fashion. Dentrecolles's attitude towards Chen was quite the opposite of Aina's. He clearly appreciated Chen's crusading stance against the "idolatrous sects" – which were also his enemy – and took obvious delight in translating Chen's indictments against them. However, more sulphurous still for him was Chen's own "Atheist" thinking. As he stated from the outset, the main purpose of the translation was to demonstrate how far the Chinese philosopher "*s'égaré* [strayed]" – a caveat we can now safely take at face value. In so doing, he drew terminology from both classical and modern European heterodox philosophies to translate Neo-Confucian concepts, while exposing what was for him the orthodox worldview in extensive footnotes. An alien, polemical voice was introduced into the world of the bean arbor, independently of the author's agenda.

Yet we are still left with the "why" question. What was the precise motivation of Dentrecolles's undertaking this translation? If it made sense for the missionary to combat the Neo-Confucian "Atheism" in China, through publications in Chinese, what would have been the rationale for doing this in French, in front of a European audience? If the purpose of Jesuit publications about China was primarily the advertisement of their apostolic achievement in this faraway land, would it not be counter-productive to disparage the "Atheism" of the Chinese literati?

One hypothesis is that Dentrecolles's attacks on the "Atheist Chinese" were in fact aimed at the Jesuits' philosophical foes in Europe who adorned themselves with smatterings of Chinese thinking. A clue can be found in one of Dentrecolles's footnotes, as Landry-Deron already suggested:⁹⁵

"... Si les Chinois avoient du *Li* la même idée qu'en a donnée le R. P. Malebranche, qui ne paroît guères instruit de leur doctrine, il auroit été aisé à notre Philosophe de répondre [...] car ce R. Pere assure que selon le système de la

⁹⁵ Landry-Deron, *La preuve par la Chine*, 23, 189.

Philosophie Chinoise, toutes les véritez sont vûës dans le *Li*, & c'est selon ce système qu'il a imaginé dans l'Ouvrage intitulé, *Entretien d'un Philosophe Chrétien avec un Philosophe Chinois*, qu'il fait parler de la sorte un Philosophe Chinois [...] Malheureusement ce langage est nouveau & inouï à la Chine, & il n'y a point de Lettré qui ne fût étrangement surpris d'apprendre qu'on lui fit tenir un pareil discours."⁹⁶

The *Dialogue between a Christian Philosopher and a Chinese Philosopher* (1708),⁹⁷ by the French Cartesian philosopher Nicolas Malebranche (1635-1715), was one of the many contemporaneous works that involved an imaginary Chinese man. Malebranche never set sail to China, and unlike contemporary thinkers such as Leibniz, he had no sustained interest in things Chinese. Though he reportedly wrote his *Dialogue* at the request of a China missionary, Artus de Lionne (1655-1713), a member of the Missions étrangères de Paris and a fierce opponent to the Jesuits, the outcome was eventually much more an exposition of Malebranche's own philosophy: he suggested that since God's existence can be proved by men's ability to perceive Infinity, to convert Chinese literati is to persuade them that the Neo-Confucian term *li* contains the meaning of Infinity.⁹⁸ This idiosyncratic proposition had little relevance to the mission, and produced no known impact in China. It did, however, spark a convoluted dispute with Jesuits in France who published an unfriendly review in their scholarly journal *Mémoires de Trévoux*, accusing Malebranche of being an atheist

⁹⁶ *Description* (French) III, 56; (English) I, 674, n*: "Had the Chinese the same Idea of the *Li*, that Pere Malebranche (who seems to be unacquainted with their Doctrine) has of it, our Philosopher might easily have answered [...]. For that Father assures us, that according to the System of the Chinese Philosophy, all Truths appear in the *Li*; and agreeably to that System which he has framed in the Work, entitled *A Dialogue between a Christian Philosopher and a Chinese Philosopher*, he makes the latter speak thus [...] Unfortunately this Language is new and unheard of in China; and there is not one of the Literati, but would be strangely surprised to hear he was made to speak in such a Manner."

⁹⁷ Nicolas Malebranche, *Entretien d'un philosophe chrestien et d'un philosophe chinois sur l'existence et la nature de Dieu* (Paris, Chez Michel David, Quay des Augustins, 1708). English translation D. Iorio, *Dialogue between a Christian Philosopher and a Chinese Philosopher on the Existence and Nature of God*, (Washington, University Press of America, 1980).

⁹⁸ Scholars remain to date unsettled on Malebranche's agenda and the depth of his knowledge about China. See David E. Mungello, "Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41/4 (1980), 551-578, and Gregory M. Reihman, "Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy: a Reconsideration", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21/2 (2012), 262-280.

himself. Malebranche contested this as a distortion of his work, and his rebuttal was also reviewed by the *Mémoires de Trévoux*.⁹⁹

The dispute between Malebranche and the Jesuits was not an isolated incident, but part of a larger story that had been unfolding since the late seventeenth century, in which China became a controversial topic that set in opposition the guardians of Catholic orthodoxy and the more or less radical contenders of the latter's authority. By that time, decades of Jesuits' and other travelers' publications had popularized among the European elite such ideas as China's antiquity, its civilizational achievements and the high moral standard of its people. This made the Chinese perfect Christian material, the Jesuits argued, although they also conceded that the majority of contemporary Chinese literati were "Atheists" who upheld the erroneous view of a godless, self-regulated universe. Yet by the late seventeenth century, as David Mungello put it, the Jesuits' argument was so persuasive that it "boomeranged" on the Church authority they defended.¹⁰⁰ For a small yet vocal number of freethinkers, a heathen and prosperous China was precisely living proof that men are capable of a moral existence *without* the fear of God; that religion, or at least an organized Church, was unnecessary for a sound commonwealth of human beings. In the same way, for natural philosophers who contested the rigid dualism of Aristotelian-Thomist physics, the superficial resemblance between the cosmology of Chinese literati and a number of European heterodox philosophies, ancient and modern, also provided support to the plausibility of a monist and naturalistic cosmology devoid of divine agency. In other words, the view of the universe as divinely designed, which missionaries for over a century had been striving to spread in China, was no longer self-evident back in Europe. The "Atheism" of Chinese philosophers had by then become a European

⁹⁹ In chronological order: *Mémoires de Trévoux*, July 1708, p. 1134-1143; Nicolas Malebranche, *Avis touchant l'Entretien d'un philosophe chrétien avec un philosophe Chinois: Pour servir de réponse à la critique de cet Entretien* (Paris, Chez Michel David, Quay des Augustins, 1708), *Mémoires de Trévoux*, December 1708, 1993-2003. See Mungello and Reihman's articles for the rundown of the dispute.

¹⁰⁰ David E. Mungello, *The great encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800* (Lanham (Maryland), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 87.

problem.¹⁰¹

This European context of the early eighteenth century lurked behind the dispute between Malebranche and the Jesuits. Although the former might not have had any polemical intention, it was such a light that the latter cast on his work. This may explain Dentrecolles's motivation in translating the final chapter of *Doupeng xianhua* in such a peculiar way as well. The Jesuit library in Beijing did possess an entire collection of the *Mémoires de Trévoux*.¹⁰² Moreover, the *Histoire de l'Académie royale des Science* – available in the Beitang Library as well – in its eulogy to Malebranche penned by its perpetual secretary Fontenelle (1657-1757) in 1718, also evoked his rift with the Jesuits, reminding readers that the dispute was still fresh in contemporary memory after ten years. “*Tandis que le P. Malebranche avoit tant de contradictions à souffrir dans son Pays, sa Philosophie penetrait à la Chine, & M. l'Evêque de Rosalie l'assura qu'elle y étoit goûté* [While the Fr. Malebranche had so many contradictions to suffer from in his own country, his philosophy penetrated into China, & Mr. the Bishop of Rosalie (i.e. Artus de Lionne) ensured that it is appreciated there]”,¹⁰³ wrote the Academy's perpetual secretary Fontenelle, before summarizing Malebranche's understanding of the notion of *li*. His sympathy was entirely with the late philosopher: “*Ils [les journalistes de Trévoux] ne convinrent pas de l'atheisme qu'on attribuoit aux Lettres de la Chine, mais le P. Malebranche soutint par quantité de Livres des Missionnaires Jésuites que cette accusation n'étoit que trop fondée*. [They (the Journalists of Trévoux) were not convinced of the atheism attributed to Chinese literati, but Fr. Malebranche supported with quantity of books by

¹⁰¹ Extensive literature exists on what Chinese philosophy stood for in the context of early Enlightenment Europe. See in particular Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680-1715* [1932] (Paris, Fayard, 2013); Virgile Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France (1640-1740)* (Paris, Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1932); Lai Yuen-Ting, “The Linking of Spinoza to Chinese Thought by Bayle and Malebranche”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23/2 (1985), 157-178; Thijs Weststeijn, “Spinoza sinicus: An Asian Paragraph in the History of the Radical Enlightenment”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68/4 (2008), 537-561; Jonathan Israel, Jonathan, “The Battle over Confucius and Classical Chinese Philosophy in European Early Enlightenment Thought (1670–1730)”, *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 8/2 (2013), 183-198. See also Wu, *Traduire la Chine au XVIIIe siècle*, 214-227, for more discussion on how this early Enlightenment context was perceived by eighteenth century missionaries.

¹⁰² Noël Golvers, *Libraries of Western Learning for China, Circulation of Western Books between Europe and China in the Jesuit Mission (ca. 1650-ca. 1750)* (Leuven, Ferdinand Verbiest Institute, 2012), Vol. 1, 170.

¹⁰³ *Histoire de l'Académie royale des Sciences* for the 1718, 106.

the Jesuits missionaries, that this accusation was only too well grounded.]]¹⁰⁴

When Dentrecolles wrote in 1723, it was highly probable that he had learnt about the dispute through this distorted lens, and decided to lend support to his brethren in France in a joint struggle against atheism, at home and abroad. Indeed, the title Dentrecolles chose for his translation – *Dialogue, in which a Modern Chinese Philosopher expressed his Sentiment...* – conspicuously mirrored Malebranche's *Dialogue between a Christian Philosopher and a Chinese Philosopher*. Dentrecolles probably intended a text authentically “translated from the Chinese” to counter a product of pure imagination. It was, therefore, owing to these fortuitous circumstances that one chapter of the *Doupeng xianhua* made its way to Europe as early as the eighteenth century through a French Jesuit.

4. The Parisian editor Jean-Baptiste Du Halde

Doupeng xianhua had not finished its transformation by the time it was turned from Chinese to French by Dentrecolles. Other actors had yet to intervene along its trajectory within Europe, each of whom brought his own agenda and added extra layers of meaning. The first of these actors is Father Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, the Parisian editor of the *Description*.

One question we have so far avoided in our analysis is the role of the Parisian editor. How much did his editing affect the translation Dentrecolles had sent him? To what extent Du Halde may have modified the reports sent by missionaries is a matter of debate among scholars. Comparing missionaries' manuscripts with the published versions, Virgile Pinot strongly criticized Du Halde for his alterations.¹⁰⁵ Based on the same comparison, however, Landry-Deron concluded, in my view more convincingly, that Du Halde's edits did not significantly distort the missionaries'

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁰⁵ V. Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France (1640-1740)* (Paris, Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1932), 174-181.

original work: they consisted primarily of stylistic improvement, and the avoiding of certain controversial wordings.¹⁰⁶ We have no reason to think that this particular case is an exception to the rule. Judging from extant writings of both men, Du Halde and Dentrecolles were similarly hostile to the perceived “Atheism” in China, which was also the official position of the Jesuits’ China mission. The ideologically charged terminology, which in addition required knowledge of the Chinese language, was probably of Dentrecolles’s own choosing.

Although the original manuscript is no longer extant to allow systematic comparison, the aforementioned letter by Cottin offers some particular insights. First, and unsurprisingly, Dentrecolles’s original manuscript does seem to be already overloaded with footnotes written in a combative style, as Cottin noted:

*“La réfutation est d’un homme savant, mais comme cela devait être le prêtre s’y montre partout. [The refutation is that of a learned man, but as it should be, the priest showed up everywhere.]”*¹⁰⁷

More interestingly, Cottin’s letter suggests that Du Halde indeed made arbitrary changes to Dentrecolles’s manuscript. Cottin described, among other noteworthy contents of the manuscript:

*“La langue chinoise présente, dit-on, un grand nombre de mots qui sont distingués entr’eux dans la prononciation par des différences tellement légères que les naturels eux-mêmes sont obligés souvent d’écrire ce qu’ils viennent de dire afin de pouvoir s’entendre. On voit un ensemble de ces méprises à la première page. [The Chinese language represents, some say, a great number of words distinguished between them in pronunciation by so slight differences that natives themselves are often obliged to write down what they have just said in order to understand each other. We see a series of such misunderstandings on the first page.]”*¹⁰⁸

This clearly refers to an amusing detail at the beginning of the translated chapter,

¹⁰⁶ Landry-Deron, *La prevue par la Chine*, 109-117.

¹⁰⁷ BnF, NAF 22169, f°54v.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

which contributes to the debunking of Chen's teaching: Chen had heard about the bean arbor, yet word of mouth transmission having deformed the information, he believed he was attending a scholarly meeting chaired by a very learned "Friend Dou" (*Dou pengyou* 賓朋友, quasi homophone of "bean arbor" *doupeng* 豆棚). This detail, depicting the encounter as the result of misunderstanding, does not appear in the published French version.¹⁰⁹ Cottin's account suggested that this detail was still preserved in Dentrecolles's manuscript. In sum, while there is no ground to suspect fundamental rewriting from Du Halde's side, Dentrecolles seems to have taken less liberty with the narrative framework than the published version suggests.

5. The Engravers in Paris and in The Hague

The "translation" of *Doupeng xianhua* was not merely a matter of written words, nor was it entirely due to the Jesuits and their ideological agenda. Engravers also left their mark on the final product by remolding two cosmological diagrams according to their own worldview and aesthetics.

Two diagrams appeared at the beginning of Chen's lecture. Speaking about the formation of Heaven and Earth, Chen suggests that his words would be more understandable if aided by pictures. Villagers in the audience offer him paper and brush, with which he draws the following diagrams:

Figure 2: Original illustrations in *Doupeng xianhua*. (Courtesy of Tokyo University East Asian Library, Baoningtang edition)

Chinese vernacular fictions are commonly adorned with pictorial elements. However, illustrations are usually separated from the text, in a picture-above-text (*shangtu xiawen* 上圖下文) format or on distinct folios.¹¹⁰ It is rather unusual to include pictorial devices as part of the narrative.¹¹¹ However, there is nothing unusual

¹⁰⁹ Youd noted this difference between the original and the published version of the translation as well, although without knowledge of Cottin's letter. Youd, "Jieyu xiaoshuo yu fei xiaoshuo zhijian", 317-318.

¹¹⁰ Craig Clunas, *Picture and Visuality in Early Modern China* (London, Reaktion Books, 1997), 29ff.

¹¹¹ We know one other Chinese vernacular fiction, the *Xu Jinpingmei* 續金瓶梅 [*Sequel to the Plum in the*

about the content of these diagrams. They are a traditional Chinese representation of the cosmos: the interlocking square and circle representing Heaven and Earth can be found in archaeological sites of pre- and early imperial China,¹¹² as well as in late Ming household encyclopedias. The cosmological model they represent can be traced back to the *Zhou bi suan jing* 周髀算經: “The square pertains to Earth, and the circle pertains to Heaven. Heaven is a circle and Earth is a Square 方屬地，圓屬天，天圓地方”.¹¹³ The belief of a square Earth is one distinctive feature of traditional Chinese cosmology, and its encounter with the European knowledge of a spherical Earth constituted a highly interesting case of cross-cultural transmission.¹¹⁴ Dentrecolles was clearly able to “read” these diagrams. In a footnote, he wrote, “*Il paroît que le Philosophe suit ici l’ancienne opinion [...] s’imaginant que la Terre étoit quarrée* [The Philosopher seems to follow the ancient Opinion... imagining that the Earth to be square]...”¹¹⁵

We have no clue how these images went to press in Paris. As mentioned earlier, it is unclear whether Dentrecolles ever sent a copy of *Doupeng xianhua* to Paris. These diagrams are, after all, not difficult to copy in his manuscript. The result of the reproduced images appearing in print in the 1735 Paris edition of the *Description* seems rather faithful.

Figure 3: Images reproduced in the *Description* (1735, Paris), p. 45-46. (Courtesy of Getty Institute).

The square shape of the Earth was respected. The Chinese scripts signifying the sun, the moon, noon and midnight were recognizably copied, which was no easy task for a Parisian engraver who knew no Chinese (he nonetheless could have

Golden Vase], produced roughly during the same period, which includes diagrams as part of its paratextual materials. Xiaoqiao Ling, “Crafting a book: The Sequel to the *Plum in the Golden Vase*”, *East Asian Publishing and Society*, 3 (2013), 115-152, in particular 141-142.

¹¹² Lilian Tseng, *Picturing Heaven in Early China* (Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2011), 37-69.

¹¹³ Christopher Cullen, *Astronomy and Mathematics in Ancient China: The “Zhou Bi Suan Jing”* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 45 and 174.

¹¹⁴ Chu Ping-Yi 祝平一, “*Kua wenhua zhishi chuanbo de ge'an yanjiu: Ming mo Qing chu guanyu diyuanshuo de zhengyi, 1600-1800* 跨文化知識傳播的個案研究——明末清初關於地圓說的爭議, 1600-1800”, *Bulletin of IHP, Academia Sinica* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊, 69/3 (1998), p. 589-670; Zhang Qiong, *Making the New World their Own: Chinese Encounters with Jesuit Science in the Age of Discovery* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 56-64.

¹¹⁵ *Description* (French) III, 46; (English) I, 668, n *.

benefitted from the help of Cyr Contancin, the missionary who returned from China and acted as the proofreader to the *Description*).¹¹⁶ The style remained austere, minimalist, as was the Chinese original. There was however one minor yet significant change. In the second diagram, the Sun and the Moon were separated by a circle – which an eighteenth-century European reader would have recognized as a celestial sphere of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic system: up until the late sixteenth century in Western Europe, the Moon, the Sun and the planets were believed to be physically supported in heaven by impenetrable solid crystal spheres. This was the characteristic “cramping orthodoxy of Hellenistic and medieval Europe”, which “the Chinese astronomers were practically free from” in the words of Joseph Needham.¹¹⁷ Although by the eighteenth century, European astronomers had generally ceased to take the celestial spheres for a physical reality, the visual representation of the Sun and the Moon dwelling on two distinct orbs seemed to have remained enough of an automatism for the Paris engraver to “correct” the Chinese diagram in this way.¹¹⁸

More interestingly still, we can observe further transformations of these diagrams as the *Description* journeyed into other European countries. Spectacular changes occurred in 1736, when the more widely-read “pirate” French edition was made in The Hague:

Figure 4: Images reproduced in the 1736 “pirate” edition of *Description*, p. 53, p. 55. (Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Delivery department).

In these diagrams of the Hague edition, the Chinese characters for “Sun” “Moon” “Noon” and “Midnight” did appear, which suggests that the Dutch engraver, who signed the work “J.v.d. Spyk”, created these images purposely for the *Description*. But these characters were the only remnant of the Chinese original, as otherwise the diagrams had been entirely Europeanized, both scientifically and

¹¹⁶ Landry-Deron, *La preuve par la Chine*, 126-131.

¹¹⁷ Joseph Needham & Ling Wang, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Volume 3, *Mathematics and the sciences of the heavens and the earth* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1959), 223.

¹¹⁸ On the visual representation of the cosmos in European traditions, see I. Bernard Cohen (ed.), *Album of Science, from Leonardo to Lavoisier, 1450-1800* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), 37-45.

aesthetically. The minimalist style gave away to an extravagant Baroque style. We find a whirling core and airy blasts in the first picture, and a round Earth in the second picture with the moon as a crescent and the sun with anthropomorphic features. The celestial sphere, which the Paris engraver had previously added by means of a simple circle, now became a ring of fire, the spaces below and beyond being respectively represented as dark, turbid and clear, starry— a vivid representation of Aristotelian concepts of sub-lunar and supra-lunar realms governed by different physical laws, a distinction that the Chinese cosmology precisely ignored. The images also lost their narrative function: it is unlikely for the protagonist to draw such complicated images in the middle of a speech. The Dutch engraver seems to have given himself over to his artistic fancies, regardless of the relevance of the image to the text.¹¹⁹

Diagrams from both the Paris and The Hague edition were later reproduced respectively by the English and German translations of the *Description*.¹²⁰ While the French translation gained autonomy vis-à-vis the Chinese original, the visual elements it contains also became an independent piece of art work, disconnected from the text.

6. Some Reactions from contemporaneous European Readers

How was this translation read by contemporaneous Europeans? Did the Jesuits' message reach their target audience? We should probably not overstate the attention it attracted. To start, its exposition of Neo-Confucianism seems to have been overlooked by most eighteenth century reference works popularizing knowledge about China, many of which offered a digest of the doctrines of “the sect of the literati” based on the *Description*: none included material from this translation.¹²¹ The terms of the

¹¹⁹ Youd notices that The Hague edition included radically different diagrams, and compares them with a Baroque style representation of the cosmos (Youd, “Jieyu xiaoshuo yu fei xiaoshuo zhijian”, 322-325). He however failed to describe the difference between the Chinese original and the Paris edition.

¹²⁰ *Description* (English) I, 667-668. German edition: *Ausführliche Beschreibung des Chinesischen Reichs und der grossen Tartarey. Aus dem Französischen mit Fleiss übersetzt, nebst vielen Kupfern*, 4 vols, Rostock, Verlegt Johann Christian Koppe, 1747-1749. The diagrams are in Vol. 3, p. 58 and p. 60.

¹²¹ See for instance, *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels ... in Europe, Asia, Africa* (London, Printed for Thomas Astley, 1747), Vol. 4, 223; its expanded French version by Antoine-François Prévost, *Histoire générale des voyages ou Nouvelle collection de toutes les relations de voyages par mer et par terre...*, The Hague, Chez

debate seem to have been already set. Interestingly, Chen's apocryphal story about the birth of Laozi became more influential, feeding into two chief reference works of the high Enlightenment: Johann Jakob Brucker's *Historia Critica Philosophiae* (first edition 1742-1744) and the *Encyclopédie* (1755-1772). Brucker's erudite world history of philosophy, in a short section on the Taoists, evoked only a Chinese account "*fabulis valde incrustatam* [heavily covered by fables]", yet made unambiguous reference to a "*philosophus ex secta literatorum Chin cognominatu* [a philosopher of the sect of the literati named Chin]" translated by the Jesuit Dentrecolles.¹²² Baron d'Holbach's (1723-1789) article in the *Encyclopédie* on Laozi ("Lao-Kiun"), on the contrary, was silent about his Jesuit source while giving an almost word-by-word citation, perpetuating Dentrecolles's mistranslations in passing. This "extraordinary" account, d'Holbach believed, was told by the Taoists themselves about the founder of their "sect".¹²³ A combination of fictional fancy, mistranslation and misreading underlay the knowledge about Taoism in Enlightenment Europe.

We should also be aware that most readers of this translation in the *Description* should not have documented their reading in a tangible way. Voltaire (1694-1778), the supreme Sinophile among French Enlightenment *philosophes*, was one of them: in the copy of the *Description* he possessed, today preserved in Russia, two paper strips have been inserted in this chapter as bookmarks.¹²⁴ However, no

Pierre Hondt, 1749), vol. 8, 240; François-Marie de Marsy, *Histoire moderne des chinois, des japonnois, des indiens, des persans, des turcs, des russiens, &c...* (Paris, chez Dessaint & Saillant, 1757), 310ff; Jacques-Philibert Rousselot de Surgy, *Mélanges interessans et curieux ou Abrégé D'Histoire Naturelle, Morale, Civile, Et Politique De L'Asie, L'Afrique, L'Amerique Et Des Terres Polaires* (Yverdon, 1765), 251ff.

¹²² Johann Jakob Brucker, *Historia Critica Philosophiae* (Leipzig: Weidmann & Reich, 1757), vol. 6, 990-991.

¹²³ *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné...*, ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (University of Chicago, Spring 2016 Edition), <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>. D'Holbach, "Lao-Kiun": "c'est le nom que l'on donne à la Chine à une secte qui porte le nom de son fondateur. Lao-Kiun naquit environ 600 ans avant l'ère chrétienne. Ses sectateurs racontent sa naissance d'une manière tout-à-fait extraordinaire; son pere s'appelloit Quang; c'étoit un pauvre laboureur qui parvint à soixante & dix ans, sans avoir pu se faire aimer d'aucune femme. Enfin, à cet âge, il toucha le cœur d'une villageoise de quarante ans, qui sans avoir eu commerce avec son mari, se trouva enceinte par la vertu vivifiante du ciel & de la terre. Sa grossesse dura quatre-vingt ans, au bout desquels elle mit au monde un fils qui avoit les cheveux & les sourcils blancs comme la neige..." See *Description* (French) III, 49; (English) I, 669. Interestingly, this short passage contains two of the overall very few mistakes Dentrecolles committed: in Aina's original, Laozi's mother is said to have "copulated in the wild" (*yehe* 野合) with her husband, instead of conceived miraculously, by a "union of the vivifying virtue of Heaven and Earth"; her pregnancy lasted eighty months, rather than eighty years. D'Holbach also signed the article on "*Ju-Kiao*" [*rujiao* 儒教, Confucianism], in which he made no use of this translation.

¹²⁴ The bookmarks are found between the pages 56/57, and 60/61. Voltaire possessed the 1736 "pirate" edition of

annotation was left, and no quotation could be found in his extensive writings on atheism, the Jesuits and China.¹²⁵

Nonetheless, we do possess two pieces of evidence of reader' reaction to the core message of this translation, interestingly both going diametrically *against* the Jesuits' orthodox agenda.

The first piece of evidence comes from the translators of the 1738 English edition. The names of these translators, which did not appear in print, have been established by Theodore Foss as the Scotsman William Guthrie (1708-1770) and the Irishman Bradock Mead (fl. 1730-1753).¹²⁶ Guthrie, in particular, was the son of an episcopal clergyman,¹²⁷ and a Protestant outcry against Catholicism and its subservient Jesuits can indeed be heard throughout the English edition, by means of an extra layer of footnotes added on top of Dentrecolles's [see figure 5]. The English translators' notes were overwhelmingly concerned with the "superstitions" and "idolatry" of the "Romish Church", taking up, in passing, the arguments the Professor Chen uses against Buddhist clergy in the first place. Upon Chen's rhetorical question as to whether "this *Fo* [Buddha], who could not save his own Mother, is able to protect another body's Mother", the English translators noted: "This is like the Protestant Argument against the Romish Saints, who cannot be supposed able to protect their Votaries, when they cannot protect their own images, Reliques, &c."¹²⁸ Likewise, for the English translators, the "Disorders" Chen denounced between Buddhist monks and female devotees are of the same kind as those "among the Female Sex and Priest in the Church of Rome";¹²⁹ the talismans Buddhist temples sold can be compared to "the Cross and Agnus Dei's Papists carry about them as

the *Description*. See *Corpus des notes marginales de Voltaire*, tome III: D-F (Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1985), 279.

¹²⁵ See especially *Lettres chinoises, indiennes et tartares à Monsieur Paw par un bénédictin* (Paris, 1776), 28-38 (Lettre III, "sur l'athéisme de la Chine"); *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (Paris, Chez Stoupe & Servière, 1792) tome 1, 291-299 (Chapitre II, "De la religion de la Chine. Que le gouvernement n'est point athée..."). Voltaire considered Chinese as Deist rather than Atheist.

¹²⁶ Foss, *A Jesuit Encyclopedia for China*, vol. 2, 643-644.

¹²⁷ *Dictionary of National Biographies*, 1885-1900, Vol. 23, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Guthrie,_William_\(1708-1770\)_\(DNB00\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Guthrie,_William_(1708-1770)_(DNB00)).

¹²⁸ *Description* (English) I, 670, note (a).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 672, note (a).

Charms to protect them against Harm”.¹³⁰ All in all, declare the English translators, “[w]e shall find that most of the [Chinese] Author’s Arguments conclude equally against Popery and the Religion of this Impostor”.¹³¹ The English re-translation of the *Doupeng xianhua* thus became a confused ideological battlefield: the Neo-Confucian protagonist attacked the Buddhists; the Jesuit translator sided with the Neo-Confucian for a while against Buddhism and Daoism only to charge him more violently with atheism; the Protestant re-translators, on their side, asserted that many parallels can be found between Buddhist idolatry and “Popery” (the selling of indulgences, the worship of images...), and declared both equally “worse than Atheism”.¹³² The Chinese philosophy served as a pretext for reopening the century-long confessional rift within Western Christendom.

Figure 5. Layers of translators’ notes in the 1738 English edition of the *Description*, I, 672 (the original French footnotes by Dentrecolles were preceded with symbols such as * and †, while notes and commentaries by the English translator were either marked with lower case letters or put in brackets.) Courtesy of Boston College Library.

The other piece of evidence comes from the French freethinker Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d’Argens (1704-1771). An adventurous polymath as well as a relentless opponent of the Church and religious intolerance, the Marquis d’Argens was the author of a six-volume work, *Chinese Letters*, initially published in French in The Hague between 1739 and 1741. Written in the fashionable format of an epistolary novel, the *Chinese Letters* presented themselves as the correspondence of a Chinese envoy in Europe. Much as Montesquieu’s Persian traveler, the Marquis d’Argens’s Chinese served as a distant eye, whose witty observations created an effect of estrangement on the European reality: despotism, fanaticism, vanity, etc.. In two letters the imaginary Chinese quoted as an authority the “Dialogue” of the “learned

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 672, note (c).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 670, note (a).

¹³² *Ibid.*, 672, note *, content in brackets.

Tchin”, based on “the translation of Pere Du Halde the Jesuit”. In Letter XI, Chen’s anti-Buddhist invectives were copiously cited, as Catholic “sects” in France were compared with the “sect of Fo”, all of which, according to the imaginary Chinese, “flatter the Passions and indulge Men with Gratification of their most Criminal Desires”.¹³³ In Letter XIV dealing with cosmological issues, we hear the same imaginary Chinese correcting his friend in Beijing on such a mistake propagated by missionaries that “the New Commentators (i.e. Neo-Confucians) appear Monstrous to all Europeans, who cannot comprehend how Men could be so ignorant as to know no other first Principle but a celestial blind and material virtue”. Yet in truth, said he, many contemporaneous Europeans did “adhere to a system which very much resembles that of the modern Chinese commentators”. The radical Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), in particular, “supposes as well as the Chinese that there is but only one Substance which he calls God”¹³⁴ – a reference to the Spinozist concept of *natura naturans*, then both celebrated and vilified in Europe as the “most systematically philosophical form of Atheism”.¹³⁵ “Thou perceives”, continued Marquis d’Argens’s Chinese –

“...that the System of the New Commentators does not appear so absurd to the Europeans as thou did’st imagine. The Missionaries imposed upon us when they told us that their Sentiments seem’d monstrous to all their Countrymen; they were far from mentioning this Spinoza to us; much less did they tell us of the many Adherents that he has in France, Germany, England, Holland, and especially in Italy...”¹³⁶

¹³³ I quote from the eighteenth-century English translation: *Chinese letters. Being a philosophical, historical, and critical correspondence between a Chinese traveller at Paris, and his countrymen in China, Muscovy, Persia and Japan...* (London, Printed for D. Browne ... and R. Hett ... 1741), 64-72. French version: *Lettres chinoises, ou Correspondance philosophique, historique et critique, entre un Chinois voyageant à Paris & sa correspondance à la Chine, en Moscovie, en Perse et au Japon* [1739] (La Haye, chez Pierre Gosse, 1751), tome 1, 112-113. About the *Chinese Letters*, see Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France*, 363-364, and René Étiemble, *l'Europe chinoise* (Paris, Gallimard, 1988), tome 2, 309-321.

¹³⁴ *Chinese Letters*, 88-89.

¹³⁵ Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

¹³⁶ *Chinese Letters*, 91.

Having thus condemned the missionaries' discourse of a unified Christian Europe, the letter went on to examine the conformities and differences between Spinozism and Neo-Confucianism based on the "Dialogue of the learned Tchín" Dentrecolles translated. "I should have been glad that the modern Commentators had been exactly of the same notion as the Spinosists", the Marquis d'Argens had his Chinese conclude.¹³⁷ The negative light Dentrecolles cast on the Chinese original did not prevent readers from receiving it positively. Ironically enough, the Jesuits' effort to combat the rise of philosophical atheism in Europe through translation turned out to have provided fresh ammunition to the opponents and served the atheists' cause.

7. Conclusion

The trajectory of *Doupeng xianhua* to eighteenth-century Europe is remarkable for the number of conflicting agendas it encapsulates. While the text *per se* remains recognizable throughout its reeditions, translations and citations, the agenda it was meant to serve was radically redefined at each step. The Chinese original of Aina stemmed from the aftermath of the Ming-Qing transition, a political cataclysm as well as a philosophical crisis for the Neo-Confucian literati. It was precisely this struggle between the author and his own intellectual upbringing that lends particular poignancy to Aina's work. Yet the French Jesuit translator entirely disregarded this originality. For him, the cosmological framework of *Doupeng xianhua* mattered instead as the *normal* worldview of the learned elite in China at that time, which he and his brethren had been combatting for a century for its perceived incompatibility with the Catholic faith. Thus he not only translated the text into a European language, but also transported it into intrinsically Christian debates. And once published, the French translation spiraled in turn out of the control of its Jesuit producers. Protestants and freethinkers appropriated it to serve their own anti-Catholic

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

or anticlerical agendas; engravers used its pictorial elements as an autonomous space for artistic creativity. How should we account for all these paradoxical agencies, which carried a text around several different linguistic, confessional and national settings?

Without overstating its significance, I believe that this case may help us to rethink some of our working assumptions in related fields. In an article in 2002, Nicolas Standaert insightfully analyzed how narratives built around a case of cultural transmission between China and Europe can significantly vary, depending on whether we adopt the standpoint of the message transmitter or that of its receiver; on whether we focus on the unchanging aspect of the message or on what was changed.¹³⁸ In the present case, if we adopt what Standaert called the “transmission framework” to take the author as standpoint, and the faithful rendering of the original as the aim of all translation, *Doupeng xianhua*’s trajectory in the eighteenth century must seem a succession of betrayals. Aina’s loyalism, irony and self-criticism were lost in translation, much as Dentrecolles’s orthodox intention was subverted by his re-translators and readers. The square Earth was rounded and the undivided Heaven cut into separate spheres. Not to mention the more subtle discrepancies between source and target texts.

Yet on the other hand, if we accept that “the text can be said to exert no authority over those who interpret it, but rather becomes dissolved in the continuum of interpretation to which it once gave rise”,¹³⁹ if we do not solely aim to “expose difference or non-correspondence”, but to “understand the internal coherence of that which is created anew as a result of the encounter”,¹⁴⁰ we may see the case of *Doupeng xianhua* in a different light. To start with, an eighteenth-century Jesuit translation undoubtedly increases our knowledge about the *Doupeng xianhua* itself.

¹³⁸ Nicolas Standaert, “Methodology in View of Contact between Cultures: The China Case in the 17th Century”, Center for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society (CSRCS) occasional Papers n°11 (2002).

¹³⁹ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 1980), quoted in Laszlo Kontler, “Translation and Comparison II: A Methodological Inquiry into Reception in the History of Ideas”, in *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 4 (2008), 31.

¹⁴⁰ Standaert, “Methodology in View of Contact Between Cultures”, 26.

The very existence of this translation provides evidence of its circulation, at least in the areas Dentrecolles was active (Jiangxi and Beijing). Despite its ruptures with the tradition of vernacular stories, its apparent lack of influence on the later development of Chinese literature, and the potentially subversive message it carried, its actual status in Qing China may have been less marginal than we previously thought. In addition, although Dentrecolles never spoke of his translating process, it is not unreasonable to assume that his choice was informed by local Chinese literati in his entourage, and therefore indirectly reflected the latter's approach. More systematic research into Qing Chinese sources should be worth undertaking so as to further clarify the reception of *Doupeng xianhua* in Qing China.

Dentrecolles's reading approach, idiosyncratic as it may appear at first sight, can also be taken as a meaningful interpretive possibility rather than dismissed as mistranslation. This is particularly true for his categorizing Aina's work as a "philosophical dialogue". The genre gap has long obliterated the identity of the Chinese original; yet once the identification of the text was made thanks to modern digital tools, we realize that such a distinction between fiction and philosophy is irrelevant for the eighteenth century, neither in Europe nor in China. Under the guise of "idle talks", Aina was indeed philosophizing upon the upheavals of his époque. The alien voice of a Jesuit should serve to highlight the relevance of *Doupeng xianhua* and similar texts for the history of ideas in Qing China, complementarily to standard corpus, thus contributing to bridging the history of ideas and the history of literature, while calling for further comparative investigations on the formats of philosophical writing in Chinese and Western traditions.

In the history of Sino-Western relations, Dentrecolles's translation may also introduce greater complexity and nuances into narratives about the Jesuits' role as a cultural mediator. Sure enough, Dentrecolles's inquisitional indictments against Chinese "atheism" can seem shockingly dogmatic to modern eyes. They definitely contradict the tenuous image of Jesuit literature being predominantly characterized by

genuine – if not disinterested – admiration or empathy towards China, and call for a more realistic assessment of this literature. Interestingly, this hostility did not turn out to hinder the production of knowledge, quite the opposite. The translation of *Doupeng xianhua* into French was precisely driven by the Jesuits' need to refute the perceived heathen errors it contained. The role of controversies as driving force for the propagation of knowledge deserves more in-depth investigations.

We may even go further and argue that this hostile stance, which stemmed from the Jesuits' realization that the "Other" is not the "Self", was precisely what made the translation *efficient* to a degree. The Jesuits' inability to penetrate the originality of Neo-Confucian monist cosmology has been a cornerstone in the influential thesis of incommensurability between Chinese and Western ways of thinking, which Jacques Gernet is best-known to advance in his classical work.¹⁴¹ The Jesuits' adherence to the rigid dualism of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition certainly prejudiced them against Neo-Confucian cosmology. However, as Gernet also noted, the "Western tradition" was itself plural; trends such as Renaissance Neo-Platonism that "run contrary to the predominant currents of thought" are "reminiscent of the Chinese ideas".¹⁴² Significantly, it was precisely to this stock of Western philosophical heterodoxies that Dentrecolles resorted to translate the Neo-Confucian cosmology. The boundary between the East and the West turned out to be much less significant than the cleavage between competing schools of thoughts. The Otherness of China can be made sense of by exploiting the heterogeneity of philosophical traditions within the West. Ironically, the ability of anti-Catholic or anticlerical readers in Europe to positively respond to this cosmology while disregarding the Jesuit's refutation, demonstrates the efficiency of the latter's translation. The Jesuits' missionary agenda posed real limits but no absolute obstacle to the transmission and fruitful reception of given ideas from China.

¹⁴¹ Gernet, *China and the first Christian impact*, 238-247.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 290, note 48.

All this, indeed, utterly uprooted *Doupeng xianhua* from its original context, and occluded the most outstanding literary achievements we today recognize in it. However, if the wealth of a work lies precisely in its ability to be (mis)interpreted, we may well find it fitting that this extraordinary work participated in fundamental debates in Enlightenment Europe: Jesuits against their philosophical rivals, Protestantism against Catholicism, atheism against religion. By losing its connections with the particular context of its gestation, it also gained a new life and a rich load of reinvented meanings. This manifold text eloquently reveals the complexity and dynamism of intercultural encounters between China and Europe in the eighteenth century and invites for further studies.